

TOWARD A DIALECTICAL UNDERSTANDING OF POWER:  
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS (Regulation 3.5.10)

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This thesis seeks to demonstrate that a dialectical motif of power runs paradigmatically throughout Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, finding its ultimate expression in his theology of the cross. Power and weakness serve as a matrix through which Bonhoeffer approached life. Thus, what began as an implicit theological category for him gradually became an intentionally explicit motif, the terms of which gained their meaning increasingly according to Luther's theologia crucis.

By examining how power and weakness manifest themselves dialectically in his understanding of God, humanity, and sin, one can see how Bonhoeffer offers a fresh understanding of divine and human power, and how these concepts gain renewed meaning methodologically and materially according to Luther's theologia crucis. Because of this sustained analysis of the meaning of power in Bonhoeffer's theology, we then examine his notion of the "arcane discipline" as a viable model for power in contemporary theology. Having ascertained the meaning associated with Bonhoeffer's dialectical concept of human and divine power, the ethical ramifications of his theological concept are discussed. In so doing, Bonhoeffer's novel definition and model of power yield a new theological and ethical language from within its overall structure.



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. . . [B]ut God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong . . .

I Corinthians 1.27

## INTRODUCTION

Living, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating.<sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther's famous words in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 indicate his stand against the reigning scholastic theology of the day. Little did one Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, four hundred years later, recognize the apposite nature such words would have for his own life. The theologia crucis made a claim in both men's lives in ways that has set them apart within the Christian tradition.

In Luther's case, his momentous discovery of the 'righteousness of God' (iustitia Dei) was a battlecry against the prevailing theologians of the day. Underlying his fresh interpretation of God's righteousness lay a critique so radical that it was to separate him irreversibly from his theological contemporaries. Luther boldly took on the theologians of the via moderna, challenging the very essence and method of their enterprise with his opposing notion of a "theology of the cross."

He took aim at the prevailing theological method of the day which upheld the use of analogy in determining the meaning of theological concepts. His complaint was specifically targeted against the human concept of righteousness (iustitia) providing the definitive analogy for determining the nature and meaning of divine righteousness. His critique of the analogical method was

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, Operationes in Psalmos, (1519), Weimar Ausgabe, 5, 163, 28.

of such a thorough-going nature that it extended to analogous determination of all divine attributes. Hence, his opposition to the view that an essential underlying continuity remains between human and divine understandings of other divine attributes such as "wisdom" (sapientia), "power" (virtus), etc.<sup>2</sup>

Luther opposed the methodology of analogy with the dialectic between opus alienum (God's alien work) and opus proprium (God's proper work)--God's works being hidden "under the form of their opposite" (abscondita sub contrario). For him, theological concepts gain their meaning in terms that are contrary to conventional human reason. This basic theological principle points to one source as authoritative for determining Christian discourse--the cross. Crux probat omnia! All theological language is subject to criticism on this basis. For Luther, the sufferings of Christ on the cross came to constitute the center and foundation of Christian theology. Thus, the father of Lutheranism pointed away from the principle of analogy toward the principle of hiddenness of God in his revelation, which is supremely expressed in the cross of Christ.

Luther believed human preconceptions about God are so confused and unreliable they must be shattered in order for a right understanding to occur. The cross stands between the gulf of human misconceived predispositions and the revealed God. There is no other locus by which one may rightly understand God. While this insight was initially linked to his early difficulties concerning the predication of human concepts of righteousness to God, his resolution of the dilemma was essentially method-

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<sup>2</sup> Alister E. McGrath, Luther's Theology of the Cross, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), pp. 153-161.

ological, and came to be extended to every divine attribute.<sup>3</sup> With his method of abscondita sub contrario, therefore, Luther came to speak of God's power revealed most clearly in weakness, God's wisdom manifest in terms humanity would deem foolish, and divine glory making its appearance in shame and suffering. Taking his cue from Paul in I Corinthians 1:18-31, the cross became his hermeneutical guide as well as theological content, as can be seen in the nomenclature assigned to his enterprise--the theology of the cross.

As a theologian of the cross, the existential dimension to this theological methodology manifest itself in Luther's personal life. A theologia crucis is not the type of theology which can be embraced or accepted in an academic sense only. It is an enterprise which takes hold in the life of the theologian. In Luther's case, his battle with a guilty conscience during his days in the monastery was an insufferable duel, the personal crisis, or force, which led to his theological breakthrough. In no uncertain terms, he described the nature of his personal struggle:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with a fierce and troubled conscience.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> McGrath, ibid., p. 160.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis W. Spitz "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," Luther's Works, Vol. 34, Career of the Reformer: IV, ed. and trans. by Lewis W. Spitz, (Philadelphia:

Fortunately for Luther, a fresh understanding of God's righteousness as it is discussed in Romans paved the way for a transformed theological insight, and the Church has not been the same since.

Four hundred years later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and theology evidenced him as a theologian of the cross as well. One can look to his theological works and immediately find tell-tale signs of a theologia crucis--for example, life under the cross as described in The Cost of Discipleship, and God's suffering and weakness in the world according to his Letters and Papers from Prison. However, Bonhoeffer, like Luther, had mitigating influences in his life which had a great deal to do with the terms of his theology and the way they developed throughout his life.

Living to see two world wars (1906-1945), Bonhoeffer observed and experienced first hand the military and political upheaval which characterized Germany at the time. He saw the rise of Hitler to power in 1933 and the consequent ramifications of his rule as chancellor over Germany. He witnessed the growing influence of extreme conservative right-wing politics and the eventual hunting, deportation, and extermination of Jews by the Nazis. He was a brilliant theologian with much promise and potential at Berlin University. He pastored in London, Spain, and Germany, and served as director of a clandestine seminary in Finkenwalde.

He studied abroad in the United States, traveled extensively during his involvement in the ecumenical movement, was a leader in the Church Struggle (Kirchenkampf), identifying himself with the Confessing Church. He is now well known for having joined

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Muhlenberg Press, 1976), pp. 336ff.

with the political conspiracy against Hitler, a commitment for which he was imprisoned and eventually executed. Despite his premature death, Bonhoeffer's life was a full one, shaped by numerous influences, challenges, obstacles and opportunities, and all of these, needless to say, had a great deal to do with the way his theology was shaped and came to expression.

Another influence of a different order, however, affected Bonhoeffer's life and theology in a distinctive way. He struggled with power throughout his life, from his childhood days on. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's best friend and biographer, related that Bonhoeffer's "whole life was a struggle to come to terms with his own power over others." The following is an excerpt of a recent interview with Bethge in which he recounts how Bonhoeffer struggled with power in his life:

[Bonhoeffer's] whole life was a struggle to come to terms with his own power over others. And in the end he accepted it as a gift. . . . In a way, his returning from America in 1939 solved, or was a great contribution to solving, that problem. In America he would have continued and continued his own power. He would have become a great theological teacher, a great friend of all of them there. But it would have been a continuation of his own growing power. So, his whole biography is from promising, highest claims and highest possibilities. He wrote his dissertation earlier than anyone else, he was always open to becoming a professor, full professor in Berlin--the main place of theology in Germany in those days. Everything was open to him. Then his biography is one of reducing and reducing, going back, into nothing. He became nothing, not a bishop, not a professor. He became nothing, nothing.

He would have become a professor, of course, as soon as possible, in 1939 in America if he would have stayed. But that would have aggravated his problem of power. So he came back. He decided to go back into that place where there was no prospect of a great career. But he gave his power in the service of others. In the form of his contribution to becoming a member of the conspiracy. Something which was, from his earlier point of view, absolutely impossible. The pacifist became a putschist. That is the background out of which he could say after coming back here, in

a letter he wrote to me, "No repetitions of tristitia." From that point on, not only in his theology, but in his life, he had made a step of no return in the service of others, with others.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, in some very honest letters, Bonhoeffer related how as a child and a young adult he struggled with ambition and a self-centered egotism. This struggle with "power over others" was the cause of Bonhoeffer's occasional bouts with depression. The earthly right of the stronger was a theme he held fast to, yet struggled with throughout his life. This was his personal struggle, and it is interesting to see these same terms reflected paradigmatically in his theology.<sup>6</sup>

Power over others and the weakness of the overpowered--this theme manifest itself as a dialectical motif in Bonhoeffer's life as he struggled to come to terms with his strong personality. This self-acknowledged temptation toward ambition and a propensity to "step over" others plagued him even when the director of the seminary at Finkenwalde.<sup>7</sup> Not until his decision the summer of 1939 to return from the States to Germany, and a most uncertain future, did Bonhoeffer finally come to terms with it in his decision to give his "power" in the service of others. His

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Eberhard Bethge conducted on Saturday, November 20, 1993, at his home in Wachtberg, Germany. See Appendix I. Bethge, to whom Bonhoeffer bequeathed his theological library, is 84 years old now. He retired after having served as a pastor in Germany for several years.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix I which elaborates on this point, esp. pp. 308-11.

<sup>7</sup> In his interview of 20 November, 1993, Bethge recounted how seminary students were drawn to Bonhoeffer and his strong persona, ceding him more authority and influence in the formation of their theological beliefs and ideals than he liked. It was a continued source of frustration for Bonhoeffer, which sometimes led to depression. He found he had to hold himself back from unduly influencing the young minds of those students who took to him. See Appendix I, p. 308.



collaboration with the political conspirators represents that selfless service.

The dialectical motif of power and weakness, thus, was an implicit category around which Bonhoeffer's theology came to expression manifesting itself explicitly throughout his life and theology, in parallel fashion. Further, as a dialectic, these terms increasingly gained their meaning and reached resolution in his theology of the cross.

Examination of the way Bonhoeffer utilized and understood the terms "power" and "weakness" throughout his theology yields new insight and meaning into basic categories of his thought. His personal struggle with power constantly gave way to a sacrificial service for others, indeed, "giv[ing] his power in the service of others," reflecting a life and theology whose contours clearly reflected Luther's theologia crucis.

In some respects, Luther's personal struggle was the opposite of Bonhoeffer's. For Luther, his guilty conscience and ceaseless sense of never satisfying God drove him to Romans and a theological breakthrough which brought him peace. For Bonhoeffer, an overconfident ego and drive toward ambition and self-advancement caused occasional depression, driving him to learn from the Bible and those around him the fulfillment of service to others. Further, Bonhoeffer's personal struggle is not tied to a major theological "breakthrough" of Luther's proportion. Whereas the guilty conscience in Luther stands out as an intentional and explicit category in his theological agenda, the dialectic of power and weakness in Bonhoeffer began as an implicit theological category--stemming from a basic struggle in life--and gradually became more explicit as an



intentional theological category as it came to take on meaning according to Luther's theologia crucis.

Despite these differences, both men are to be understood in relation to one another primarily as theologians of the cross. Like Luther before him, Bonhoeffer heralded a new kind of theological language, a turn toward a new understanding of theological concepts. It would be a "non-religious," or "secular" use of theological language. In his letters from prison he made it clear that a theology of the cross was the "starting point" for this new theological language. To many, scholar and layperson alike, this is as far as he got with his novel theological formulae. As a result of our examination into Bonhoeffer's life and theology, however, we shall see how his dialectical understanding of power and weakness came to yield a new language therein, whose terms and concepts gained meaning increasingly according to Luther's theologia crucis.

Given that both men's life and theologies as a whole point to a theologia crucis, what does one mean, specifically, by referring to Luther and Bonhoeffer as theologians of the cross? Five characteristics repeatedly come to the fore,<sup>8</sup> distinguishing this kind of theology from others:

(1) the theologia crucis is a theology of revelation, which stands in sharp contrast to speculation. God has revealed himself, and it is the task of the theologian to be concerned with God as he has chosen to reveal himself, instead of constructing preconceived notions of God which ultimately must be destroyed.

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<sup>8</sup> See Walther von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman, 5th ed., (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), pp. 17-24; Alister McGrath, op. cit., pp. 148-152.

(2) this revelation is indirect and concealed. A direct knowledge of God is not possible, we see only his "rearparts," the posteriori Dei.<sup>9</sup>

(3) this revelation is to be recognized in the sufferings and the cross of Christ, rather than in human moral activity or the created order. For Luther, the cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian belong together.<sup>10</sup>

(4) this indirect knowledge of God which is concealed in the humility and shame of the cross is a matter of faith. For Luther, the "theologian of the cross" is one who, through faith, discerns the presence of the hidden God in his revelation in Christ and his passion and cross. Thus, the concept of the hidden God (deus absconditus) lies at the center of the theology of the cross.<sup>11</sup>

(5) God is particularly known through suffering. A fundamental contention of the theologia crucis is not merely that God is known through suffering, but that God makes himself known through suffering.

These are the interrelating themes of Luther's cross-centered theology, the matrix out of which Luther and Bonhoeffer came to understand the theological enterprise.

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<sup>9</sup> McGrath rightly points out that this aspect of the theology of the cross is one of the most difficult to understand. In elucidating the concept he points to Thesis 20 of Luther's Heidelberg Disputations as the key: "although it is indeed God who is revealed in the passion and the cross of Christ, he is not immediately recognisable as God. Those who expect a direct revelation of the face of God are unable to discern him in his revelation, precisely because it is the posteriora Dei which are made visible in this revelation. In that it is God who is made known in the passion and cross of Christ, it is revelation; in that this revelation can only be discerned by the eye of faith, it is concealed. The 'friends of the cross' know that beneath the humility and shame of the cross lie concealed the power and glory of God--but to others, this insight is denied." McGrath, op. cit., pp. 149-150.

<sup>10</sup> Von Loewenich, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> McGrath, op. cit., p. 150. John 14:8,9 in the New Testament serves as one of the two pericopes Luther referred to in order to illustrate this particular point: Phillip says, "Lord, show us the Father." And Jesus' reply, "...whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

## Purpose and Structure of Thesis

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that a dialectical motif of power runs paradigmatically throughout Bonhoeffer's theology, finding its ultimate expression in his theology of the cross. Although Bonhoeffer did not intend a programmatic definition of power in his theology, power and weakness serve as a crucial matrix through which he viewed life and the terms in which he understood it. What began as an implicit theological category for him, therefore, gradually became an intentionally explicit motif, the terms of which gained their meaning increasingly according to Luther's theologia crucis.

This study divides analysis of Bonhoeffer's thematic of power into four chapters. The first three chapters document the way he articulated his understanding of God, humanity, and sin dialectically in terms of power and weakness. While Chapter One shows how he increasingly understood and came to describe God in terms of weakness, suffering, and rejection, Chapter Two shows how his anthropology reached its full expression in terms of strength and autonomy. These two chapters, taken together, most fully reveal the way Bonhoeffer came to define divine and human power in terms of divine powerlessness. Chapter Three shows how Bonhoeffer went beyond Luther's systematic definition of sin by articulating its concrete, ethical contours in terms of the abuse or misuse of power over others.

By looking at the way power and weakness manifest themselves dialectically in his understanding of God, humanity, and sin, we are able to see how Bonhoeffer offers a fresh understanding of divine and human power, and how these concepts gain renewed meaning methodologically and materially according to Luther's

theologia crucis. Because of this sustained analysis of power's meaning in Bonhoeffer's theology in the first three chapters, we then examine his notion of the 'arcane discipline' as a viable model for power in contemporary theology in Chapter Four. Ascertaining the terms and meaning associated with Bonhoeffer's dialectical concept of human and divine power illuminates the ethical ramifications of his theological concept. In this way, Chapter Four shows how Bonhoeffer's novel definition and model of power yield a new theological and ethical language from within its overall structure.<sup>12</sup>

#### The State of Bonhoeffer Scholarship

In the last six years scholarship has focused on Bonhoeffer's late work. In 1988 at the Fifth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference in Amsterdam scholars took an in-depth look at Bonhoeffer's incomplete Ethics, pushing forward with novel methodological theories and fresh insight into his ethical agenda. The results of this conference have been published in the volume Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers.<sup>13</sup> Four years later, the 1992 Sixth International Conference chose for its theme "Bonhoeffer's Legacy for the Future: Responsibility in a New World." Out of that conference,

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<sup>12</sup> This thesis restricts its focus to the most fundamental social aspect of power as it is discussed in Bonhoeffer's theology, i.e, the sociality of power between persons and within the Church. Because this study seeks to uncover the basic sociality underlying Bonhoeffer's understanding of power, it does not address the ramifications of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on civil or state power.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Carter, Rene Van Eyden, H.D. Van Hoogstraten, and Jurjen Wiersma eds., Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991.

one theme which repeatedly came to the fore was the significance of Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross in a world come of age. Scholars from nations all over the world, such as Latin America, Canada, Holland and America all highlighted the significance of Bonhoeffer's notion of the weak, powerless God in today's modern world and how the academy as well as the church must proceed if it is to determine the way God is present in the world today.

These conferences have led students, clergy, professors and lay-persons alike to explore some of the more provocative themes of Bonhoeffer's late thought. The powerlessness of God in the world is one of those themes, one which this study builds on and hopes to further dialogue. Three scholars in particular have pushed Bonhoeffer studies forward by demonstrating the concrete connection between his theology of the cross and the way "power" figures into his thought: Clifford J. Green, Larry Rasmussen and Geoffrey B. Kelly. Twenty years ago, Clifford Green decisively demonstrated human power as the specific soteriological problem in Bonhoeffer's early theology.<sup>14</sup> Engaging in a theological analysis of power in Bonhoeffer's early theology, he argued that it must be understood as a "theology of sociality." By examining some recurrent passages, all having to do with the problem of power, Green demonstrated how Bonhoeffer's theological writings on the problem of power have an autobiographical dimension. Thanks to his work on Bonhoeffer's early thought, Green not only demonstrated conclusively the need to weigh Bonhoeffer's life and theology together, but he showed the legitimacy of "power" as a theological concept within the corpus. As Green performed in his

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<sup>14</sup> See Clifford Green, The Sociality of Christ and Humanity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Early Theology, 1927-1933, (Missoula Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), esp. pp. 145-177.

work, we shall demonstrate how Bonhoeffer's life illuminated his theology without it becoming a form of psychological reductionism.

Up until Green's work, Christology had long been thought central to Bonhoeffer's theology much to the exclusion of other theological categories. By demonstrating the close relationship between Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology and Christology, Green pointed to a new hermeneutical rubric by which to understand the early theology. In this thesis we would like to carry Green's work one step further in two ways. First, we shall build on his notion of the sociality of Bonhoeffer's theological enterprise, by holding that the specific nature of this sociality lies in the way Luther's theology of the cross comes to expression throughout Bonhoeffer's theology. Secondly, while Green jump started Bonhoeffer studies by proving power as the specific soteriological problem in the early theology, we shall demonstrate how power as a controlling motif develops and gains its meaning dialectically, throughout the entire theological corpus. In this way, we will prove the inherent connection between Bonhoeffer's concept of power and his theology of the cross.

Larry Rasmussen, in his recent book Dietrich Bonhoeffer--His Significance for North Americans<sup>15</sup> highlights the need for power analysis in theology and ethics, pointing to Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross as the authoritative guide for such an agenda. He has forwarded the agenda for theology and ethics with provocative questions which have guided his own inquiry:

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<sup>15</sup> Larry Rasmussen with Renate Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer--His Significance for North Americans, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).



It is not clear what the relationship of human and divine power in our time is. What does [the] sentence actually mean, theologically--"the ordering of all life is shifting in a sense from God to humanity"?<sup>16</sup> What does it mean in moral terms? What is the nature of God's presence now? Or, to respect the testimony of many, what is the nature of God's absence now? Is God's presence and/or absence different from ages in which human beings held less power and had less impact on the world of which they were a part? In short, what are we to make of divine and human power in our time, as "God-talk" and as "ethics-talk"?<sup>17</sup>

Rasmussen has done an excellent job introducing the multi-farious topic of divine and human power and weaving it together with Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the topic. The next step is to engage his analysis and see how we might forward the dialogue.

I agree with Rasmussen that what we need at the moment is not critique but "conceptual clarity and promising paths for this formidable subject [of power]."<sup>18</sup> Further, he is asking all the right questions when he asks:

How shall we think about these new powers? More to the point, how shall we think of them theologically, up against the ancient confession that God is the source of all power and the one to whom we are accountable for the powers we hold? Just what do we understand to be the relationship of divine to human power now, in our time?<sup>19</sup>

These are questions of content, of meaning which mandate a second look at the thoughts and practices which have been normatively

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<sup>16</sup> Rasmussen is quoting James Gustafson, Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol. 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 281.

<sup>17</sup> Rasmussen, ibid., p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Rasmussen, ibid., p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Rasmussen, ibid., p. 111.

assigned to divine and human power. We take up our inquiry, holding Rasmussen up as one who provides conceptual clarity and a promising path in the face of such pressing questions. With him, we look to the theologia crucis for answers, believing human power must be defined according to these terms.

Finally, in his excellent article "Revelation in Christ. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation,"<sup>20</sup> G.B. Kelly explicates the profound significance of the connection between the paradoxical weakness of the cross and power:

Luther's theologia crucis serves . . . as the basis for Bonhoeffer's proposed reform of theological discourse and for an explanation of how God chooses to affirm the world and exert his salvific power in that world.<sup>21</sup>

Kelly advances the investigation into Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis one step further by delving into the paradoxical concept of God's "power in weakness." This notion lies at the heart of Bonhoeffer's later notion of a "secular" or "non-religious language." But it is also a fundamental concept that Bonhoeffer held throughout his life.<sup>22</sup> This paradoxical notion merits much more attention than it has received among Bonhoeffer scholars. Thus, this study builds on Kelly's acute analysis, holding it up as a key concept to Bonhoeffer's overall theological enterprise.

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<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Revelation in Christ: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses, L.1 (May 1974), pp. 39-74.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly, ibid., p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Eberhard Bethge highlighted this significant fact in his famous biography, "The belief in the power of weakness was one of Bonhoeffer's most basic insights, and he was to hold to it throughout his theological life." Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, (London: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985), p. 374.



Eberhard Bethge remains the authoritative source for Bonhoeffer studies. In a recent interview, he confirmed that Bonhoeffer struggled with "power over others" in a fundamental way throughout his life and theology. However this struggle for power was always social in nature, between him and others. Thus, it was a dialectical kind of struggle between power and weakness, Macht und Ohnemacht. Bethge's reflections on Bonhoeffer sharpen the focus of this study, demonstrating in finer detail than would have been possible otherwise the significance of power as a social concept in Bonhoeffer's theology.

In his critique of John Milbank's recent book, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, Nicholas Lash pointed out how narrowly Milbank defines "power" (as dominium) in diametric opposition to peace. Lash raises the crucial issue:

Rather than eschew all talk of 'power,' rather than deny that it is 'virtuous' to be peaceable, the theological task is better seen as taking good words up and purifying them of misuse by setting them in the context of a Christian understanding of God's out-poured love. And, if we can do this for 'power' and 'virtue' and 'peace' . . . then it should be possible to do it also for a politics which is 'not exactly' politics as we would otherwise understand and execute it.<sup>23</sup>

Lash captures how "power" needs to be released from its narrow definition. Whether one is presupposing "power" in the Nietzschean sense of violence like Milbank does, the fact is that negative connotations commonly surround this concept. So often, power is thought of in material terms, as an object which can be possessed, captured or seized upon. It leads one to see power

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<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power?" Modern Theology, vol. 8, No. 4, (1992), p. 362.

as a corrupting influence, one which must be checked, balanced and measured constantly, lest domination and aggression be carried out over those not possessing or holding it. Power becomes an object to be grabbed from the hands of others,<sup>24</sup> something to be renounced, or, in its most positive light, a thing to be equitably shared among people. This reflects the materialist objectification which surrounds the whole concept of power, at least in the contemporary Western world.

With Lash, we believe "power" as a concept needs to be freed from its negative, restrictive connotations to a Christian one that offers promise and hope. With Rasmussen, we believe the present need for power analysis in the theological enterprise is acute. Bonhoeffer offers a new understanding, a new language by which we may understand power as it is defined at its root by the cross of Jesus Christ. Rather than making fragmentary and inchoate stabs at a non-religious language, he gave a solid start by showing consistently how "power" can be released from its objectivizing shackles to become a social, relational concept. We turn now to see just how "power" develops as a concept in Bonhoeffer's theology, and the way the theologia crucis impinges upon it.

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<sup>24</sup> At least in the United States, it has become commonplace to describe the 1980's as the decade of greed. Two figures as diverse in American politics as Hillary Rodham Clinton and Lee Atwater said the same thing: "The 80's were about acquiring--acquiring wealth, power, prestige,..." quoted from the article "Malaise" in The New Republic, May 31, 1993, p. 46. Such reflects the objectified connotation of power which has taken hold in the American mindset.

[O]ur coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. . . . God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. . . . Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. . . . The world's coming of age . . . has done away with a false conception of God, [and] opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters & Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July 1944, p. 360-61.

## CHAPTER ONE

BONHOEFFER'S DIALECTICAL UNDERSTANDING OF DIVINE  
POWER ACCORDING TO THE THEOLOGIA CRUCISIntroduction

Bonhoeffer's early theology intimated what became real for him later in his life and theology--the dialectical notion of the power of God's weakness. The fact that he thought about God in terms of weakness is clear, particularly in the prison letters where he suggested only the weak God can help a humanity that has developed increasingly in terms of autonomy and secularity.<sup>1</sup> However, he always spoke of divine weakness in terms of its hidden power.<sup>2</sup> The meaning associated with this duplex terminology increasingly took on a paradoxical, if not dialectical tone, reaching resolution in terms of his theologia crucis.

Although evidencing some ambiguity and inconsistency in his early work (1927-1932), Bonhoeffer remained true to Luther's paradoxical notion, maintaining the hidden-yet-revealed God in the form of the crucified Christ as the starting point for any

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<sup>1</sup> "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Eberhard Bethge, (New York: Collier Books, 1972), pp. 360-61.

<sup>2</sup> "The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness." Ibid., p. 361.

formulations about God. He eventually relinquished descriptions of God in terms of strength and omnipotence for ones characterized by weakness, suffering, and vulnerability. God's hiddenness is not revealed in terms of absolute rule, in the form of an omnipotent sovereign, rather God is revealed in Jesus Christ through selfless sacrifice for the other. We begin by drawing out the way Bonhoeffer thought and based his theological statements about God in these terms. It soon becomes apparent as he clarified and developed his understanding of God from 1932 onward, how divine hiddenness and divine strength receive their meaning from Luther's theologia crucis and the dialectical notion of God therein. A qualitatively different understanding of divine presence in terms of power results.

Following a brief introduction of Luther's notion of the hidden God, this chapter takes a look at Bonhoeffer's early understanding of God (1927-1932). Then a consideration of the year 1932 shows that a personal change in Bonhoeffer had far-reaching implications for his life and theology, particularly the concrete way he understood God. From that point on, (1933-1945) a steady progression away from omnipotent, glorious imagery for God to terms characterized by weakness, suffering, and hiddenness is apparent.<sup>3</sup> The "hidden God" increasingly took on the characteristics of Luther's theologia crucis. Such an understanding of God revolved around the hidden-yet-revealed Christ whose power was demonstrated axiomatically on the cross in death and suffering for others. In this way, we see the early Bonhoeffer

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<sup>3</sup> We save our analysis of Bonhoeffer's statements on the Ethics for chapter two. Because he speaks dialectically about human autonomy and divine authority there, we reserve our analysis for a more extended examination and discussion than the purview of this chapter will allow.

(1927-1932) relinquishing ambiguous notions of God which belied a young theological voice for profound ones which embraced a hidden God whose power is defined in terms of the suffering and weakness of Christ on the cross.

# I. Luther's Notion of the Hidden God

Much debate has centered around the exact meaning of God's hiddenness and how to locate it with regard to other theological doctrines in Luther.<sup>4</sup> Walther von Loewenich, once Professor of Church History at the University of Erlangen, was renowned for his influential work Luthers Theologia Crucis (1929), gaining attention in Europe in the early thirties and later in America in the seventies. Tracing the historical development of Luther's understanding of the hidden God from the early Heidelberg Disputation (1518), to the middle period in The Bondage of the Will (1525), to the late lectures on Genesis (period after 1525), von Loewenich ultimately characterized the idea of the hidden God as most intimately connected with Luther's theology of the cross, emphasizing the faith character of the knowledge of God.

Before him, Theodosius Harnack in Luthers Theologie (1927) emphasized the two-fold knowledge of God--knowledge apart from

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<sup>4</sup> Walther von Loewenich helpfully lists the multi-faceted questions which have been asked regarding how to interpret this doctrine in Luther: "What does it mean? Is the hidden God one and the same as the revealed God, or is he to be associated with the absolute God of scholasticism? Is faith concerned with the thought of the hidden God, or is it a product of speculation? Is it a creation of the dilemma into which Luther fell because of his extreme and daring polemics, or is it intimately entwined with Luther's central thoughts? Above all, does the thought remain substantively the same in the course of Luther's theological development?" See Walter von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 5th ed. 1982), pp. 27, 28.

Christ (natural knowledge) and knowledge of God in Christ (revelation)--and coupled this notion with his own emphasis on the category of God the creator and God the redeemer. For him, this double relationship was the basic design along which Luther's theology follows. Yet still earlier, Albrecht Ritschl (1868, Geschichtliche Studien zur christlichen Lehre von Gott) believed the idea of the hidden God represented a relapse for Luther into nominalism, a purely arbitrary God bound by no law, conjured up polemically against Erasmus.

Von Loewenich found Harnack's distinction between creator God and redeemer God exaggerated and ultimately unsuitable as a basis for the doctrine of the hidden and revealed God.<sup>5</sup> By passing over the contrast Luther made in the Heidelberg Disputation between God manifest in his works (the creator God) with the God hidden in suffering, Harnack subordinated the hidden God to his basic design of God the creator-redeemer, thus denying himself insight into the revelatory character of the hidden God.<sup>6</sup> Von Loewenich staked his claim upon the fact that the nexus between the hidden and revealed God is preserved when the faith character of knowledge is emphasized. He ultimately believed the

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that von Loewenich first wrote Luthers Theologia Crucis in Germany when Reinhold Seeburg was a Professor of Systematic Theology at Berlin University, the exact time he served as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's doctoral supervisor. Given the paucity of secondary literature on Seeburg, I would highlight von Loewenich's numerous references to him. He locates Seeburg as one who has incorporated Harnack's thesis in a somewhat modified form in his history of dogma. In von Loewenich's eyes, Seeburg so thoroughly subordinates the hidden God to Harnack's basic design of creator-God and redeemer-God that Seeburg demonstrates how the road from Harnack leads back to Ritschl again, denying himself insight into the revelatory character of the hidden God.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, pp. 47, 48.



hidden God is intimately connected with Luther's theologia crucis, with faith being a crucial element of such a theology.

Luther's warning that his concept of the hidden God could and would be misused prophetically pronounced its inherent theological vulnerability. However, whether he would have anticipated the ambiguity and misinterpretation which has surrounded an even larger aspect of this thought--the theologia crucis--is anyone's query. At the turn of the twentieth century in Germany, estimates varied as to the theological import and historical origin which should be assigned to this aspect of Luther's thought. Some maintained that the theologia crucis was as a pre-Reformation theology, influenced by Tauler's mysticism, characterized by monkish quietism, and not to be taken seriously as a pervasive aspect of his thought.<sup>7</sup> Others virtually ignored the concept in Luther altogether.<sup>8</sup> Others, however, like von Loewenich, pushed forward the thesis that "Luther's theology of the cross must not . . . be regarded as a preliminary stage of Luther's theology, but rather that it constitutes an integrating aspect of Luther's entire theology."<sup>9</sup>

The five essential aspects of this theologia crucis are:

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<sup>7</sup> Theologians following such a path include Hermann Hering, Die Mystik Luthers, (1879); Otto Ritschl, Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus, (1912); and Ernst Wolf, Staupitz und Luther, (1927).

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Seeburg discusses Luther's early doctrinal views, but does not mention the concept of the theologia crucis. See Reinhold Seeburg, Die Lehre Luthers, (1917) reprinted in Dogmengeschichte IV, 1, trans. Charles E. Hay, Baker, 1954, Vol. II, Book III, Part I, Chap. 1. See also Julius Kostlin, Luthers Theologie, (1901).

<sup>9</sup> Von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, p. 49.



- 1) The theology of the cross as a theology of revelation, standing in sharp antithesis to speculation;
- 2) God's revelation as an indirect, concealed revelation;
- 3) God's revelation as recognized not in works but in suffering;
- 4) Knowledge of God who is hidden in his revelation as a matter of faith; and
- 5) The manner in which God is known as reflected in the practical thought of suffering.<sup>10</sup>

The significance assigned to Luther's theology of the cross has crucial relevance for the way the German father's concept of the hidden God is appropriated theologically. That the doctrine of the hidden God is a disputed chapter in Luther's thought is borne out by the complexities surrounding his theological background, polemical skirmishes, and asystematic treatment of theological topics. Recent Lutheran scholarship has done much to forward the thesis that Luther's theology of the cross is a consistent, substantive theme throughout his theology, the paradigm out of which the hidden God is intimately developed and most accurately understood.<sup>11</sup> As Alister McGrath has noted,

although the full implications of the existential character of faith and the hiddenness of God's self-revelation in the cross have yet to be appreciated, it is evident that the characteristic die of Luther's theologia crucis has already been cast by late 1515. It is for this reason that we regard Luther's discov-

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<sup>10</sup> Von Loewenich, ibid., p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> See Alister McGrath, Luther's Theology of the Cross, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993). McGrath not only makes an eloquent argument for the hidden God as a cornerstone of Luther's theologia crucis, he provides detailed information regarding Luther's medieval background and training which invaluabley guides one to a more accurate understanding of the nature of Luther's theological development. See McGrath, ibid., pp. 148-75.

ery of the 'righteousness of God' as being a catalyst for the development of the theologia crucis: Luther's solution to his initial difficulties over the true meaning of institia Dei was not complete in itself, but was pregnant with potential conceptual elaboration. That elaboration took place over the years 1516-18, and led to the statement of that theology which is for ever associated with the name of Martin Luther--the 'theology of the cross.'<sup>12</sup>

For Luther, the concept of the hidden God is intricately bound to the duplex notion of the knowledge of God. Luther speaks of a general (generalis), natural knowledge of God which is implanted in the hearts of all persons and a particular, proper (propria) knowledge of God which is revealed in Christ.<sup>13</sup> Regarding such knowledge, one Luther interpreter says,

In the hands of the natural man, the natural knowledge of God gives rise, not to true religion, but to 'all idolatry, which without the knowledge of the Divinity, could never have come into the world.' The fault, of course, lies not with the knowledge, but with the man, who invariably misinterprets and misuses it, Luther maintains, in such a way that, without the 'proper' knowledge of God given in Christ, he can never avoid idolatry.<sup>14</sup>

When we proceed to inquire into the relationship of this duplex knowledge we discover that both types testify simultaneously to the same God. What, then, is the nature of their differences, given they have the same content and do not displace one another? The clue is found when we inquire into the more precise content of Luther's general knowledge of God.

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<sup>12</sup> McGrath, ibid., pp. 160-61.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Jaroslav Pelikan & Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), vol. 12, pp. 310-11; vol. 31, pp. 37-70.

<sup>14</sup> Philip S. Watson, Let God Be God!, (London: Epworth Press, 1947), p. 85.

Luther assigned great meaning and significance to omnipotence as an attribute of God, both in terms of actuality and potentiality.<sup>15</sup> Philip Watson, in his important work on Luther, Let God Be God!, concurs that sovereignty and righteousness are two attributes that can be regarded as of outstanding importance in Luther's view. Indeed, Luther believed God's supreme power was written on every person's heart.<sup>16</sup> Power is understood in terms of God as omnipotent Creator. If this is a basic element of a natural knowledge of God, what, then, constitutes the proper knowledge?

When discussing the hidden God, we are at one and the same time referring to the revealed God. God's hiddenness and revelation are to be understood thus by the fact that God confronts us with his Word. Indeed, he "wraps" or "clothes" himself in his Word. If this were not so, God would "crush and annihilate us in his majesty, for his is a consuming fire."<sup>17</sup> Thus, Luther considered Christ as:

the best means of signifying what is in the speaker's heart. God's revelation of Himself in Christ, therefore, enables us to know 'what is going on in the Supreme Majesty' (wie es in suprema maiestate zughet). This is a far greater thing than if God had revealed how He created heaven and earth, for here He discloses His inmost self, His very essence or substance (suam substantiam).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Luther's Works, op. cit., vol. 34, pp. 199-299.

<sup>16</sup> '[T]hat God is omnipotent, not only in power but in action, and that if it were not so, He would be a ridiculous God'. Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, trans. H. Cole, (London: Ed. H. Atherton, 1931) p. 244.

<sup>17</sup> Von Loewenich, ibid., p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> See Watson, ibid., p. 132.

Luther goes on to describe the 'substance' of God as love.<sup>19</sup> Chief marks of this Divine love are described as a spontaneous love, a lost love, and above all, amor crucis--the love of the Cross.<sup>20</sup> The cross is marked by the profound unconditional love Christ has for all. Of central importance is the fact that the cross, too, is the locus where Christ, as Incarnate love, proves invincible over the forces of lovelessness and selfishness.<sup>21</sup>

Although debates have occurred over which theory of atonement is operative in Luther, scholars have presumed the dramatic-dualistic theory, which places primacy upon the notion of Divine love, over against the penal theory which focuses on Divine justice.<sup>22</sup> Whereas in the former, Christ's atoning work is seen as God's own work, directed toward persons in bringing them into a new relationship with God, the latter sees Christ's atoning work as directed toward God in order to change God's attitude about persons. The operative truth at the heart of the cross, then, in Luther, is the notion of Divine love.

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<sup>19</sup> Watson, ibid., p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> Luther describes God's spontaneous love as a quellende Liebe, "a love that wells up and flows forth out of the loving heart, quite independently of all external considerations . . . [s]uch love seeks not its own, but its neighbour's good . . ." Luther's lost love (verlorene Liebe) is characterized by unconditional love to friend and enemies alike, regardless of whether it meets reception or rejection. Finally, as for the love of the Cross, Luther says, "[f]or sinners are lovely because they are loved; they are not loved because they are lovely. So man's love shuns sinners and evil men. But thus Christ: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. And this is the love of the Cross (amor crucis) born of the Cross, which betakes itself not where it finds a good to enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the evil and the needy. For it is more blessed to give than to receive, says the Apostle." See Watson, ibid., p. 69, fn. 50; 133-34.

<sup>21</sup> See Watson, ibid., p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> See Watson, ibid.; Gustav Aul  en, Christus Victor (London, 1937); Anders Nygren Eros and Agape, A Study of the Christian Idea of Love, (London, 1932, 1938-9).

Now the connection between the amor crucis as the essence of God's proper revelation and the omnipotent Creator is clear. The solution to how both the general knowledge and proper knowledge are a unity is reached in the following manner:

Instead of the subordination of love to justice, on the one hand, or to arbitrary might on the other, which he found in Scholasticism, he seeks to represent both law and power as at the service of love. Indeed, it can be said that he finds precisely in the love, both the essential righteousness and the unassailable sovereignty of God. God's righteousness is no longer conceived in terms of distributive justice, but is identified with the grace by which He justifies the ungodly; and precisely this grace is the surest sign of His omnipotence, since He is a greater God, more really God, who can forgive and save sinners, than one who only knows how to punish and destroy.<sup>23</sup>

Omnipotence, therefore, is understood in terms of love, not as arbitrary power, nor primarily in terms of creation. The cross provides the defining point for God's power and omnipotence in the world. Spontaneity, unconditional love and especially love of the cross thus display the contours of divine power. They provide the signposts of how God's power is understood from the perspective of the theologia crucis.

This connection between the Deus absconditus and the Deus revelatus--between general, natural knowledge and particular, proper knowledge of God--comes to a climax with the schema of Divine love, quintessentially expressed in the notion of amor crucis.<sup>24</sup> Luther has effectively relocated the doctrine of God's omnipotence from an abstract doctrine, which is typically formulated primarily from the purview of the doctrine of creation, to subordinate it to the notion of divine love, love as

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<sup>23</sup> Watson, ibid., p. 136.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. McGrath, ibid., p. 165.

it is defined according to the cross. When God's attributes, such as power and righteousness, are defined under the rubric of love, and this love is amor crucis, then a reevaluation of all values results from the cross.<sup>25</sup> The "foolishness of God" is wiser than human wisdom, the "weakness of God" is stronger than human strength.

The connection between the two kinds of knowledge provide a critical theological linchpin. "There is no hiddenness of God for Luther other than the hidden form of his revelation."<sup>26</sup> The cross figures in the center for making sense of the profound intricacies surrounding Luther's duplex knowledge of God. The pivotal character, then, of his theologia crucis takes on added dimensions when we look to the way Bonhoeffer understood and utilized concepts like the notion of the hidden God.

## II. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Early Theology: A Certain Ambiguity (1927-32)

Bonhoeffer pursued a lifelong quest to understand the way God is concretely present in the world. Although it was some time before he explicitly articulated his thoughts on God's hiddenness, his early theology intimated this interest. Bonhoeffer's use of certain key theological concepts and terms foreshadow the theologia crucis which increasingly came to mark his thoughts about God. The way he spoke of God in terms of power and weakness throughout his life bears this out. Certainly, his later prison thoughts on the weak God who has been pushed

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<sup>25</sup> Von Loewenich, ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> McGrath, ibid., p. 166 quoting H. Bandt, Luthers Lehr vom verborgenen Gott, (Berlin, 1958), p. 94.



out of the world by humanity are well-known. Clifford Green paved the way for power analysis in Bonhoeffer by identifying 'power' as a central motif in the German pastor's early theology. We seek to take Bonhoeffer scholarship one step further by identifying the way power and weakness together as dialectical motifs mark his overall theological thought. In this way, we shall see how this paradigm is a significant matrix out of which he developed some of his most basic statements about God.

#### A. Influences

Concerning Bonhoeffer's influences during this period of his academic training Bethge said:

At Berlin University he came to grips with the historical critical method, with primitive Christianity, Luther and Luther-anism, and the nineteenth century. In comparison he did not gain nearly so much from, or come to grips with anything like the same extent, the Old Testament, Calvin and his world--this he almost completely ignored--and the great medieval theologians. On the other hand, the new world of dialectical theology was completely his own discovery.<sup>27</sup>

We begin by examining these influences by taking the last first--Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer's first exposure to Barth occurred between the summers of 1924 and 1925. Letters to his parents reveal the books Bonhoeffer was reading. In a letter dated 9.8.1924 he revealed his preoccupation with philosophy, sociology and the history of religion. Max Weber's Sociology of Religion and Troeltsch's Social Theories of Christian Ethics topped his list of planned summer reading.

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<sup>27</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 62.



In May and June of 1925 the tone of his letters changed. Bonhoeffer began discussing Gogarten's The Religious Decision and it became apparent that a new interest had been discovered. He also possessed a copy of Barth's first volume of Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie (1924). During the winter of 1924-25 Bonhoeffer indulged himself in reading Barth's works. Further, through a relative who was attending the school of theology at Göttingen, Bonhoeffer received copies of notes from Barth's lectures "Instruction on the Christian Religion", I and II, the groundwork for what was eventually to be Barth's Prolegomena to Christian Dogmatics (1927). From these notes Bonhoeffer gained his first insight into the structure of the foundation for Barth's Römerbrief.<sup>28</sup>

The profound effect Barth was to have on this young theological student can be seen clearly in a seminar essay Bonhoeffer submitted to Seeburg in the summer of 1925. The title of the essay was 'Can a Distinction be drawn between a Historical and a Pneumatological Interpretation of the Scriptures, and What is the Attitude to this of Dogmatic Theology?' In this essay, Bonhoeffer basically refuted the very teachers for whom he had just written papers, Professors Harnack and Holl. In relegating the place of historical and textual criticism to the ash-heap<sup>29</sup>,

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<sup>28</sup> Bethge goes on to say that Bonhoeffer likely became aware of the journal Zwischen den Zeiten through his cousin at Göttingen, but also through attending Harnack's seminar on the apostolic fathers during the winter term of 1924-25. He must have been aware of the controversy between Barth and Harnack as epitomized in the 1923 issue of Christliche Welt. Cf. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 51.

<sup>29</sup> Bethge mentions that Bonhoeffer still maintained the necessary place of critical, historical work in Biblical studies, but did not adequately reconcile this concession with his overall argument. Cf. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 56.

Bonhoeffer proceeded to advocate the pneumatological exegesis advocated by Barth.<sup>30</sup> Bethge quotes Bonhoeffer in this essay,

The Christian religion stands or falls by belief in divine revelation that became historically real, tangible and visible--that is, to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear--and thus essentially implies the question that we are posing today about the relationship between history and spirit, or applied to the Bible, between letter and spirit, Scripture and revelation, man's word and God's....All attempted pneumatological interpretation is prayer, supplication to the Holy Spirit which alone gives it the hearing and understanding without which the most highly intellectual exegesis is nothing. Textual understanding and interpretation, ministry, i.e., the realization of God, is included in the prayer: Veni creator spiritus.<sup>31</sup>

This seminar essay points to the beginning of Bonhoeffer's basic advocacy of Barth's theology of revelation and pneumatological exegesis which was to last, despite various theological points of disagreement between the two, throughout the rest of the German pastor's life.

A second major influence on Bonhoeffer was the renaissance of Lutheran research and scholarship taking place in Germany, particularly in Berlin University during the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1925 he participated in two ecclesiastical history seminars under the guidance of Karl Holl (1866-1926), one of the premier modern interpreters of Luther in Germany. Bonhoeffer was deeply impressed with Holl's foray into the center of Luther's doctrine of justification. The young theological student was permanently convinced of the profundity of Luther's

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<sup>30</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> Bethge, ibid. Interestingly, Bethge notes that Seeburg was so affected by the 'pneumatological exegesis' that he began to make reference to it in his seminar, and published a paper on it, R. Seeburg, 'Zur Frage nach dem Sinn und Recht einer pneumatischen Schriftauslegung', Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie, 1926, IV, pp. 3-59. Cf. Bethge, p. 57.

notion of cor curvum in se, but he was disappointed with Holl's interpretation of Luther's faith as a religion of conscience<sup>32</sup>, thinking it did away with the extra me character of revelation, as well as with his weakly developed christology.<sup>33</sup>

Holl's influence proved to be lasting in that while Bonhoeffer was in prison in Tegel in 1943, he had the professor's Kirchengeschichte sent to him. Largely through his exposure to Luther through Holl, he learned to claim and to challenge his Lutheran heritage on his own terms. While Bonhoeffer considered working with Holl on his licentiate thesis, he ended up studying with Reinhold Seeburg in his favorite area, systematic theology.

Given his exposure to renewed Lutheran scholarship, we can identify an aspect of Luther himself that was to make an

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<sup>32</sup> Presenting Luther's faith as a "religion of conscience," Holl took his cue from Fichte's ontology of conscience and the Idealist tradition. With his "religion of conscience" Holl was able to make a proof for God's existence by stressing the experience of divine wrath in the conscience. By stressing this experience of wrath, he also brought out how, in Luther's theology, relief came in clinging to the divine Word of promise and the accompanying forgiveness that alone stills an accusing conscience. In God's wrath, Holl recognized a hidden, mysterious aspect of God--a hiddenness which turns out to be "the mask under which God hides himself." This is a part of God's essence, that he reveal Himself in His opposite. Thus, Holl's Luther resolved the tension between deus absconditus and deus revelatus, and trust in God's sole and complete causation of everything (Alleinwirksamkeit, literally, 'self-effectiveness') eliminated any ethical dilemma.

In Holl's view, God's omnipotence was for Luther behind the entire world. The nature of this God and His purposes were hidden, and trusting faith was necessary to resolve any moral tensions. Even though Holl recognized this hidden aspect of God, he strongly believed God's wrath was purposeful, necessary as a breaking up of the old and preparation for the new in God's creation. Indeed, such an understanding of God is ambiguous and ill-defined, with the ambiguities and contradictions of divine omnipotence reconciled on the sole basis of faith. See John Stroup, "Political Theology and Secularization Theory in Germany, 1918-1939: Emanuel Hirsch as a Phenomenon of His Time," Lecture Given to Faculty of Harvard Divinity School (January 9, 1986), pp. 17-18.

<sup>33</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 46.

indelible impression on Bonhoeffer as is evidenced in his early works. Luther's ontological notion of coram Deo<sup>34</sup>, i.e., persons living in the presence of God, is the fundamental concept at work in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian community's existence. Specifically, it forms the kernel of his argument against Idealist philosophy's pneumatico-anthropological concept, which Bonhoeffer deemed inadequate as we shall see. But what is the meaning attached to Luther's concept of human life live coram Deo?

First, it is important to note that according to Gerhard Ebeling, a preeminent German interpreter of Luther, that coram Deo is the key word to Luther's understanding of being.<sup>35</sup> Luther is interested in investigating the nature of reality, the ontological situation of human existence. Basically, he believed that human life cannot be lived in an independent way, free of or from God. All of life is lived coram Deo, 'in the presence of God':

...the fundamental situation is that something is defined here not in itself, but in its outward relations with something else, or more properly, in terms

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<sup>34</sup> Gerhard Ebeling explains the exact meaning of the phrase coram Deo. See Gerhard Ebeling, Luther: An Introduction to His Thought, trans. R.A. Wilson, (London: Collins, 1970), p. 193. Ebeling says the precise meaning of the phrase is "before the face of," is "in the sight of." The fundamental significance of the Latin coram is the Old Testament understanding of reality at work.

Clifford Green, in his dissertation The Sociality of Christ and Humanity, argued that the "dynamic-voluntaristic" thought of Luther that took root in Bonhoeffer was nothing other than Bonhoeffer's own "theology of sociality." Clifford Green, The Sociality of Christ and Humanity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Early Theology. 1927-1933, (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 90, 91. While agreeing with Green as to the fundamental nature of this basis in both Luther and Bonhoeffer, however, this study is restricted to this dynamic concept of reality as the coram relationship.

<sup>35</sup> Ebeling, ibid., 193.

of the relationship of something else with it...the profundity of the situation that is implied by the preposition coram is not the way in which someone else is present before me, in my sight, but the way that I myself am before someone else and exist in the sight of someone else, so that my existential life is affected.<sup>36</sup>

For Luther, persons only truly exist in being recognized, living coram. Further, the coram relationship involves the expression of reality in the spoken word.<sup>37</sup>

Luther does not derive the coram thought merely from the phenomenon of our encounter with fellow human beings, even though he is concerned with the encounter between one person and another as well. The essential point of this coram relationship is presence in the strict sense. Hence, this fundamental situation of coram Deo, existence in the sight of God, in the presence of God, and in the word of God is the concept at work.<sup>38</sup> As Bonhoeffer grappled with articulating the way persons understand themselves, it was the coram relationship which defined his thinking.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, and from another direction, Bonhoeffer continually wanted to acknowledge the 'pro me' character of salvation. Bethge said it was this personal concern of Bonhoeffer's which adumbrated his theological concern in Sanctorum Communio and Act and Being. And there can be no question that it was this concern that drove his notion of 'Christ existing as

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 195-96.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-98. Ebeling goes on to say, "For Luther this has the concrete meaning that reality is only understood for what it is if the word of God, through which it has its being and which is what is truly real in it, is heard."

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>39</sup> We see this in Act and Being, where Bonhoeffer quoted Luther at crucial points regarding the passive nature of human existence before God.



community.' This concern to discern the 'pro me' character of Christ's work reveals an important clue behind Bonhoeffer's desire to elucidate the concrete form of revelation. Until he was able to articulate clearly how it was that the Word of God was made concrete, and how this concrete, Incarnate presence continued on in time and history, in the form of the Church, then he remained unsatisfied that christological formulations remained formalistic claims. In this way, we shall see how Bonhoeffer's desire to articulate revelation's concreteness distinguishes him from Barth.<sup>40</sup>

One can see, especially in Act and Being, Bonhoeffer's concern that Barth, who believed the presence of the Holy Spirit determines whether a human word is concrete or an abstraction, nevertheless failed to describe in concrete terms the way in which the Spirit is present in the world, how revelation is a concrete reality in the world. In Act and Being Bonhoeffer criticized Barth as maintaining a formalistic understanding of

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<sup>40</sup> James Burtness argues that the finitum capax infiniti must be understood as a key to Bonhoeffer's life and work. A very instructive part of the article, in which Burtness is quoting Paul Lehmann, points to the importance of this formula for both Barth and Bonhoeffer: "For Barth, the incapax protected the concreteness of God in his revelation, as it were, on the giving end of the stick. For Bonhoeffer, the capax protected the concreteness of the revelation of God, as it were, on the receiving end of the stick, that is, in the reality of faith. For both, the major question of theology was the question of concreteness." James Burtness, "As Though God Were Not Given: Barth and Bonhoeffer, and the Finitum Capax Infiniti," (unpublished manuscript on file at Bonhoeffer Archives, Union Theological Seminary) p. 253.

Bonhoeffer was not content to leave the concreteness on the "receiving end" as unformulated as Barth did. Both men were interested in the same thing--the concreteness of revelation. But both wanted to convince the other of where that emphasis should lay, hence their different Reformed and Lutheran convictions played a large role in the way they approached God's revelation to humanity.

God's freedom.<sup>41</sup> Two years later, in 1932, he subdued his accusation, but revealed again his struggle with the Swiss theologian's manner of interpreting revelation:

Barth admits without hesitation that he too is not 'assured against the sin' of making 'God an object of thought', and that his principles too are subject to the danger of being a 'last defence against God himself and his intervention in our life'. The characteristic feature of his theology is precisely that he believes that he cannot offer a sure defence against this danger, and yet thinks of it continually; his knowing that the ultimately concrete can be spoken only by the Holy Spirit and that every concrete human word remains an abstraction unless it is spoken by the Holy Spirit sets a limit to his theological work.<sup>42</sup>

#### B. Sanctorum Communio

During these formative years in Bonhoeffer's life, one cannot help but detect the vigor and drive with which he approached tasks. He was only 19 years old when he began work on his doctoral thesis in 1925. For his topic he chose to examine the sociological structure of the Church.<sup>43</sup> Essentially, he was trying to reconcile the two influences that were seemingly irreconcilable at the time: Ernst Troeltsch and his critical sociological agenda and Karl Barth with his revelational,

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<sup>41</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, (London: Collins, 1962) p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted from Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 136. Also, found in the original German in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften vol. III, p. 156. Helpfully, in his own footnote, Bethge mentions that the quote above clarifies Bonhoeffer's 1944 observation about 'revelatory positivism' which suggests Barth's notion of revelation ends up as an object of thought. This accusation will be examined later on in the study.

<sup>43</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, reprinted in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 1 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1986).



unapologetic theology.<sup>44</sup> In his thesis, Bonhoeffer developed his argument around the idea that Christ exists as the Church or Christian community (Christus als Gemeinde existierend).<sup>45</sup> Targeting German idealism, Bonhoeffer accepted some of its philosophical tenets but rejected others and suggested ways for overcoming its deficiencies. For example, he criticized idealist philosophy for its lack of a voluntaristic concept of God, as well as its lack of a profound definition of sin. He argued for the innate sociality of persons, their sinful nature, and the transcendent nature of revelation. Regarding Idealism's flaw, Bonhoeffer said,

[w]e note the basic lack of a concrete concept of the person. The picture is everywhere the same. The

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<sup>44</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pp. 57-60. Barth's appraisal of Sanctorum Communio was laudatory--he went so far as to call it a "theological miracle"; unfortunately, he did not know of the work or its significance until after Bonhoeffer had died in April, 1945. Barth said of Sanctorum Communio, "If there is one thing that justifies Reinhold Seeburg, it may lie in the fact that there emerged from his school this man and this thesis which, with its broad and deep vision, not only rouses the deepest respect when one looks back at the situation at the time, but also is to this very day more instructive, more stimulating, more enlightening and more truly 'edifying' to read than a great deal of the better known writing that has since been published on the problem of the Church . . . I frankly admit that I find it difficult at least to maintain the level then reached by Bonhoeffer, and from my place and in my own language to say as much and not to express myself more weakly than that young man did then." See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol. 4/2, p. 641. Also, see Peter Berger's essay "Sociology and Ecclesiology" in Martin Marty, ed., The Place of Bonhoeffer, (London: Billing and Sons Limited, 1963), esp. pp. 55-57 where Bonhoeffer's place among the dialectical theologians of the day is clarified.

<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer's usage of the term 'community' was influenced largely by two persons: Hegel and his understanding of community as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit in the form of Absolute Spirit and Seeburg with his notion of community as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit in the form of absolute will. Bonhoeffer wanted to refashion the whole christologically, believing he was overcoming Troeltsch and Barth's antithesis by attaining a third overriding position. Whenever the term "community" is used in reference to Bonhoeffer, the Christian community or church is implied.

spirit is the one, is everlastingly identical, supra-personal and immanent in man. It destroys the concrete person and thus makes any concept of concrete community impossible, sacrificing this to the unity of immanent spirit.<sup>46</sup>

Through emphasizing such "defects," he went on to stress the Christian community in opposite terms. Here, Bonhoeffer spoke of God voluntarily revealing and joining himself to a human community of individuals--the church which is simul justus et peccatorum--in the form of the Holy Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

The Christian community is "weak" in that it is always simul peccator. Bonhoeffer emphasized this half of Luther's notion to make up for Idealism's excesses, but he had more specific things to say about the nature of Christ existing as community. He had a clear framework in mind regarding the purpose of the divine and human will with his notion of "Christ existing as community." He said:

In the community of God it [immediate community] clearly means, first, the absolute identity of purpose of the divine and the human will, within the relation of the creative to the created, that is, the obedient will. In other words, within the relation of ruling and serving . . . . In religious language, certainly, this community is built upon immediate and mutual love; but because love rules when it serves we have the problem here of a pure association of authority (Herrschaftsverband): by limitless serving God rules limitlessly over men.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, (London: Collins, 1963), p. 138.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Bethge points out that this was Bonhoeffer's view: "God's freedom confines itself within the limits of a weak human community of individuals. This had already been the view of the Bonhoeffer who wrote Act and Being . . . ." Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 374.

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, p. 41.

Within this vulnerable human community a certain order prevails having to do with the relation of ruling and serving. The social undercurrent is characterized by this hierarchically conceived relationship. However, Bonhoeffer points to a new understanding of this correlation by stressing the sociologically unique structure of the Christian community.

Whereas determining and pursuing God's will is traditionally perceived as the end toward which the community should strive, he suggests that in the mutual love of the saints, "communion" is in fact established as an end in itself. The paradox lay in the fact that love finds communion without seeking it, yet such communion is God's will for the Church:

But as it is precisely this communion of saints that the divine will purposes, the difficulty is resolved; the position therefore is not that this communion has a further aim outside itself . . . but that communion (in the broader sense) is in fact organized exclusively towards a specific end, namely, the achievement of God's will. But, as the community itself represents this realisation it is an end in itself.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, God's will is for communion, yet, paradoxically, the community must not attempt to achieve it on its own, for then it eludes realization. The paradox is revealed in the fact that God's ultimate rule within the community creates the love which enables persons to act in one another's behalf. God's rule is absolute and his authority binding, but such manner of ruling manifests itself not only in terms of obedient service on the part of men and women, but of persons in service to one another. In this way, God's rule is manifest in its paradoxical opposite--service. Clarifying his position Bonhoeffer said:

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<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 125-26.

In order to understand [the Christian community's unique sociological structure] fully we must note further that the communion of saints knows that it is organized on the basis of authority. It is communion only by virtue of the rule of the divine will within it. The paradoxical nature of this relationship of authority between God and man in revelation has its basis in the fact that God rules by serving.<sup>50</sup>

Bonhoeffer's scheme of authority, while maintaining a conservative structure at its base--the hierarchical relation of absolute ruling and obedient service--provides a paradoxical interpretation that yields an entirely new understanding of these terms. It all turns on his notion of divine rule manifesting itself in service--its seeming opposite. Such a scheme for the Christian community is provocative, yet full of danger and promise.

There can be no doubt that Bonhoeffer's Systematics Professor, Reinhold Seeburg, had something to do with his student's schema. The professor affected Bonhoeffer's overall theological outlook with the notion of communities as communities of "will." This is the volitional aspect of Seeburg's theological program which stayed with Bonhoeffer throughout his life.<sup>51</sup> Seeburg envisioned men and women as creatures who encounter one another, each possessing a will. It is inevitable that these wills confront each other and interact with one another. In the fallen world, and as "willing" creatures, one tries to force one's will upon another, making the "defeated" will submit to it.

Seeburg believed that only in the co-operation of wills ("social synthesis" of wills) would their dissolution be

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<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> John P. Beal, "The Seeburg Connection: The Influence of Reinhold Seeburg on the Early Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 1976 (unpublished manuscript on file at Bonhoeffer Archives, Union Theological Seminary), pp. 14-16, 26-28.



achieved. In speaking of the sociality of the human spirit, Bonhoeffer took Seeburg's notion and applied it as well to the relation between God and humanity. It is community (Gemeinschaft) that results in this encounter between wills. Bonhoeffer expressed the thought of the community as a community of will:

To see the individual person as an ultimate unit, created by God's will, but as real only in sociality, is to see the relations of one with another, built upon difference, as also willed by God. This means that strife is the basic sociological law. Concretely this means that in every social relation there must be an element of partisanship. Only in the conflict of wills does genuine life arise, only in strife does power unfold. This insight is by no means new . . . it does not mean that the other will is ignored or denied, but it is forced into one's own will and so overcome. Only in the co-operation of wills is their opposition dissolved. This is the 'social synthesis which triumphs over all antitheses of the will and of nature' . . . .<sup>52</sup>

The danger of such a concept of sociality between persons lies in the fundamental coercion, strife, and antagonism between and over persons that adumbrates the sociological structure of the community. It suggests within its foundations an absolute

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<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, pp. 54-55. Bonhoeffer attributes the insight that "only in the conflict of wills does genuine life arise, only in strife does power unfold" to Seeburg in his Dogmatics. It is also worth noting that Bonhoeffer was reading Nietzsche during his doctoral studies. He refers to Hobbes as the first to express the purely social significance of strife and Paul Natorp with his notion that discord drives humanity forward.

Also Bonhoeffer referenced Seeburg regarding the notion of personal sociality, "[s]o far I can see, it was not until Reinhold Seeburg, in his Christliche Dogmatik . . . in his teaching about man's innate spirituality, that the idea of sociality was suggested as belonging to man's original nature, thus restoring to dogmatics an important doctrine, without which the ideas of original sin and of the church cannot be fully understood." See Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 43. The thought of systematic sociologist Othmar Spann also heavily influenced Bonhoeffer in the notion of mutuality as the essence of personal spirituality. This thematic ended up constituting a cornerstone of Bonhoeffer's enterprise in Sanctorum Communio.

tyranny that is incompatible with the notion of mutuality Bonhoeffer is suggesting. What kind of mutual service to the other is derived from an absolute rule which mandates such behavior? With such categories Bonhoeffer's model seems to fall into a dangerously conservative trap.

Yet the promise of Bonhoeffer's sociological model overcomes its dangers in the way divine rule is defined and discussed. Bonhoeffer clarified what lay at the root of this sociality--a life principle of vicarious action based on Christ's ultimate sacrifice on the cross for others:

Not 'solidarity', which is never possible between Christ and man, but vicarious action, is the life-principle of the new mankind . . . . Since now Christ bears within him the new life-principle of his church, he is at the same time established as the Lord of the church, that is, his relation to it is that with a 'community' and that of a 'ruler'.<sup>53</sup>

The nature of Christ's rule is based on an ultimate act of sacrifice for others. Therein, power and authority are conferred on Christ. Bonhoeffer clarifies his concept of vicarious action even more:

The unique quality of the Christian idea of acting vicariously is that this action is strictly vicarious with regard to guilt and punishment. Jesus, being himself innocent, takes the others' guilt and punishment upon himself, and as he dies a criminal, he is accursed, for he bears the sins of the world and is punished for them; but on the felon's cross, vicarious love triumphs; obedience to God triumphs over guilt, and thereby guilt is in fact punished and overcome. Such, briefly, is our way of seeing Christ's vicarious action.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, p. 107.

<sup>54</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 113-14.



Bonhoeffer goes on in Sanctorum Communio to delineate the concrete ramifications of the communion of saints. The social acts constituting the community of love clarify the structure and nature of the Church, specifically, the content of this mutuality among persons. Bonhoeffer summarizes such social acts as: 1) God-appointed structural 'togetherness' (miteinander) of the church and its members; and 2) the principle of vicarious action--that the members act for one another (füreinander)<sup>55</sup>

The crux of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological model rests with this notion of social mutuality--defined according to Christ's vicarious action and demonstrated through action with and for others in Christian community. He points to Luther and the fact that such a principle for the community involves 'being transformed into one another through love.' As Bonhoeffer put it:

Without in any way linking this with any mystical ideas about the vanishing of the frontiers between the concrete I and Thou, Luther is simply saying that now I no longer want anything but the Thou, and the one loving me does not want anything else but me; and that there is a reversal--as it were, a transformation--of the attitudes imposed by sin. In this event I am bound to reach the point where the want, infirmities and sins of my neighbor afflict me as if they were my own, just as Christ was afflicted by our sins.<sup>56</sup>

Bonhoeffer is able to talk about service and ruling in the same breath because of the new interpretation Christ brings to such seemingly contradictory motifs. The paradigm rests in the notion that the nature of God's rule, authority, and power centers in

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<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 126-27.

<sup>56</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 127 (emphasis added).



his sacrificial giving of himself on the cross for others.<sup>57</sup> It is not a tyrannical rule based on domination and coercion of others toward a divine purpose. It is an absolute authority of a different order, the power of which is effected in a way contradictory to normative concepts of absolute authority.

Mutual self-giving within the Christian community is not experienced as a mandate wielded with duress, but as a natural inclination as a result of God's authoritative action within individual persons. Thus, the sinful tendency to dominate others and have one's way in the community is transformed into the gracious proclivity for selfless action for the sake of others.

Even in his early days as a doctoral student, Bonhoeffer thought about God's presence in the world in terms of power and weakness, ruling and serving, command and obedience. But we already see how he pointed to a fresh understanding of what divine authority looks like, and this having its genesis in Luther's emphasis on the transformative power of love and finding expression in the principle of vicarious action. These are just some of the terms Bonhoeffer used in his academic work, but they yield a theme, a prism through which the young man developed his lifelong theology. Moreover, they foreshadow a fundamental theme for which he became well-known in his prison letters--his statements about God in his weakness and powerlessness in the world, Jesus Christ as the 'man for others,' and the autonomy and strength of a world come of age. Terms of strength and weakness which mark his late thought are intimated by the very categories Bonhoeffer used as early as 1925. Thus, his academic work

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<sup>57</sup> In this case, Bonhoeffer refers exclusively to the Christian community.

anticipates his later thought by an important paradigm through which he first developed his theological thought.

### C. Act and Being

In writing his Habilitationschrift in 1929-30, Bonhoeffer continued with his unique line of interest in ecclesiology, specifically the idea of "Christus als Gemeinde existierend." Whereas Sanctorum Communio had been a theological-sociological investigation into the concrete nature of the Church, Act and Being was a theological-epistemological study into the same topic.<sup>58</sup> In the latter book, Bonhoeffer was attempting to resolve the debate between actualistic theology (Barth and Bultmann) and the new "theology of being" (Heidegger). Bonhoeffer set out to reconcile the two different viewpoints by suggesting the epistemological dialectic of act and being is better understood as the social dialectic between faith and the church.<sup>59</sup> In other words, he was wanting to preserve the contingent and continuous nature of revelation in unity with his concept of the church as the concrete form of revelation. Before we see how Bonhoeffer expressed his motif of Christ existing as community, we shall look briefly at the ways he discussed revelation in actualistic and ontological terms.

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<sup>58</sup> Bethge, ibid., p. 98.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. See also Wayne Floyd, "Christ, Concreteness and Creation in the Early Bonhoeffer," Union Seminary Quarterly Review, vol. 39.1-2 (1984), p. 10. He described Bonhoeffer's project in Act and Being in the following manner: "Bonhoeffer wished to do better than either what he understood to be the empty existentialism of Heidegger or Bultmann, or the positivity of revelation which he feared of Barth."

Bonhoeffer shared with Karl Barth a fundamental belief in God's freedom to act among humanity in the event of revelation. However, the theological student continued to struggle, more explicitly than he did in Sanctorum Communio, with the ramifications of Barth's dialectical understanding of that freedom. Regarding Barth's understanding of God's freedom in revelation Bonhoeffer said:

The Word of God is not bound and shall never be bound. Theological dialectic is a genuine theological dialectic in so far as it is open to this thought, it is finally this and only this thought, and if it serves the freedom of the Word of God.<sup>60</sup>

While he wanted to maintain the transcendent nature of revelation along with Barth, Bonhoeffer could not advocate a dialectical understanding of God's freedom in the way that Barth did at that time. Holding true to the Lutheran dictum finitum capax infiniti, Bonhoeffer wanted to maintain an understanding of God's freedom that demonstrated the concreteness of revelation in the world.<sup>61</sup> Bonhoeffer's conclusion was that unless God's freedom is understood in its concrete form in the world, one

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<sup>60</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Akt und Sein, reprinted in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 2 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1988), p. 79 (author's translation).

<sup>61</sup> Bonhoeffer's quest for the concrete expression of God's revelation in the world comes through in one of his addresses to the German-speaking congregation he served in Barcelona in 1928. Entitled, "What is a Christian Ethic?" he emphasizes the fact that ethics is concerned with persons' direct involvement in the concrete situations of the world. In so doing, "ethics does not become once again a way from man to God, but remains like everything that men who know themselves to be freed from the world by Christ can do...a demonstration which God can either accept or refuse . . ." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, vol. 1, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden, (London: Collins, 1965), pp. 47-48.

results in making God an object of thought. That is why, then, later in Act and Being, he questioned the epistemological interpretation of transcendentalism in revelation and suggested instead a sociological framework. Such was the nature of Bonhoeffer's struggle to advocate an actualistic understanding of revelation.

Bonhoeffer believed that outside of faith there was such a thing as a being of revelation upon which persons' faith could rest. Although he was drawn to dialectical theology's apperception of the nature of existence, he could not fully accept it either. Bonhoeffer understood existence, from the perspective of dialectical theology, as "that which is not able to demonstrate itself in truth, but it can only be understood in the decision for God . . ."<sup>62</sup> The danger he saw in such an understanding was that of a concept of existence achieved outside revelation. Bonhoeffer was thinking specifically of Bultmann when he said, "Only from the sinful condition is one able to interpret one's historicity, and not the other way around."<sup>63</sup>

Bonhoeffer was strongly affected by the appearance of Martin Heidegger's Being and Time.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, it was his notion of Dasein that influenced Bonhoeffer's understanding of existence. Dasein may be translated as the entity which exists, namely, man [sic] himself.<sup>65</sup> This notion was the key in helping

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 91. (author's translation)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 92. (author's translation)

<sup>64</sup> Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, 1927.

<sup>65</sup> Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, p. 59. This is Bonhoeffer's translation of the word. He speaks of it in more detail as "man's understanding in history, in the given temporal context of the decisions he has taken." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 63. Apparently, it was Heidegger's revolutionary perspective in phenomenology--to consider existence in temporal, historical

Bonhoeffer conceive of being in personal, finite terms, not impersonal, infinite ones. Heidegger's concept of Dasein was able to articulate the continuous basis of human existence that Bonhoeffer was looking to express in theological terms. Ultimately, however, he had to reject Heidegger's notion of Dasein because it had no room for revelation; it was a self-contained understanding of human existence. However, Bonhoeffer's critique of Heidegger was even more pointed than that.

Bonhoeffer was in direct opposition to the notion of "possibility" or "potentiality" that laid behind Heidegger's concept of being. Whereas Heidegger's system allowed, even invited one to think of existence in terms of possibility, Bonhoeffer rejected this outright. For him, such notions, when applied to theology called into question God's freedom in revelation. Giving voice to his displeasure, he said,

Existence is thought in relation to revelation as it is affected by revelation. Here there is no more potential of being affected . . . . Existence is either genuinely affected or it is not; indeed, as the concrete spiritual-physical unity is a 'boundary' which passes no longer through man or can be drawn by him, it is Christ himself.<sup>66</sup>

Bonhoeffer could not accept an understanding of existence which carried with it an understanding of potentiality of being. To him, persons live an either-or existence, in a concretely determined existence which has been created by God and revealed to us in revelation. This brings us to Bonhoeffer's conception

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categories, rather than in timeless ones, (i.e., Husserl)--that caught Bonhoeffer's attention.

<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer, Akt und Sein, op. cit., pp. 75-76 (author's translation).

of existence and how he was able to overcome Heidegger's definition.

Bonhoeffer, referring back to Luther's concept of passive existence, advocated an understanding of existence as an "existence which undergoes." So for him, the solution to the existentialist notion was to be found in the Church. There we can understand the continuity of the person, both as sinful and saved. Bonhoeffer articulated the continuous nature of personhood with his anthropological categories of "being in Christ" and "being in Adam."<sup>67</sup> Such a schema provided for the determined existential situation of persons; there is no possibility or impossibility of being in existence. There is only the concrete, fixed reality of persons as sinner and saved, communio sanctorum et peccatorum. Obviously, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the human existential situation applied to the Christian community only. Later he would expand his christology to expand and include the whole world. Here, he is trying to solve the problem of act and being by focusing on the simultaneous anthropological reality in the church.

Two contextual factors must be highlighted in order to appreciate the theological formulations that were asserted in Act and Being. First, Bonhoeffer was struggling with the influence of the theological faculty at Berlin. No less than the liberal

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Act and Being, pp. 153-184; Akt und Sein, pp. 135-185. Bonhoeffer mentions the Catholic philosopher-theologian Przywara and the Thomist principle of "analogia entis" (analogy of being) (p. 66, Act and Being). Despite his success in "opening the concept of being to transcendence" with his thorough ontological treatment, Przywara's schema is ultimately rejected by Bonhoeffer for the reason that "[a]ny attempt to establish an ontological principle by fastening the idea of the creature to "Adam" must lead to...a pure metaphysics of being." (p. 157, Act and Being) Bonhoeffer is basically disturbed by the analogia entis' lack of an ontological acknowledgement of the sinful character of the human creature in its doctrine of Adam.



questions of the nineteenth century interested him. Yet, he was indelibly changed by Barth's revelational theology and its basic tenets. How was he to reconcile the two?<sup>68</sup> The key for Bonhoeffer was to assert that persons cannot understand their existence from their own perspective. The nature of our existence is not independent, but an existence which "undergoes," a passive existence. Here, we see again the second major influence on Bonhoeffer's anthropological stance--Luther and his notion of human existence as coram.

With Luther, Bonhoeffer denied that persons can ever understand themselves from a self-referential point of view. Such an attempt is doomed from the beginning because the nature

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<sup>68</sup> John Godsey argues that it was the way in which Barth and Bonhoeffer nineteenth-century liberal theology and the way in which it was to be overcome which was the basic difference between them. Godsey points to the 180-degree turn from liberal theology's anthropological starting point as the key indicator of Barth's reluctance to deal with experientially-oriented questions of the modern world. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, still wanted to address these anthropological questions. Hence, a socio-existential side of Bonhoeffer that Barth chose not to take up. See John Godsey, "Barth and Bonhoeffer: The Basic Difference," Presidential Address, American Theological Society, April 1986, unpublished manuscript on file at Bonhoeffer Archives, Union Theological Seminary, pp. 24-27.

We concur with Godsey's appraisal of the difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer, especially with reference to both of their early theologies. Although he did not agree with liberal theology's way of dealing with its basic anthropological questions, Bonhoeffer provided a way of answering those questions without falling prey to the presuppositions of that same era. Barth, in his book, The Humanity of God, said with reference to the Erlangen school of theology, "But insofar as Hoffman's theology was intended to be a theology of Christian self-understanding and not a theology of the Holy Spirit, it could not break through the general trend of the century. This is true in spite of the significance which this theology has for us even today. The basic concern of evangelical theology could not find a genuine expression in these terms. If only the need for an approach from below had been genuine and had grown out of a new examination of the authentic concerns of theology!" Karl Barth, The Humanity of God, (London: Collins, 1961), p. 25. We contend that Bonhoeffer did have such a genuine approach from below, reexamining anthropology from the authentic concerns of theology.



of existence is such that persons exist before God whether they like it or not and know it or not. It is this Lutheran understanding of the passive nature of human existence which formed the backbone of Bonhoeffer's argument against liberal theology's anthropological schema. Men and women are able to gain accurate self-understanding only through faith, from an existence which lies outside of them and informs them. This is the manner in which Bonhoeffer presented the categories of persons--"being in Christ" and "being in Adam"; living as judged and forgiven persons before God in the church.

Bonhoeffer was able to discuss the way God's revelation is both act and being, contingent and continual in nature, by pointing to the dialectic at work between faith and the church. We have just seen how he asserted the priority of justification in any anthropological quest for human self-understanding. The Church is the necessary counterpart of the dialectic in that it is only in the Christian community that an accurate understanding of self is possible. It is only in the Church, through the gift of faith, that one understands herself/himself as both condemned and justified.

We can certainly see in Act and Being a continual progression toward a concrete description of how one is to recognize the Word and the Spirit in the Church. Without such concretization, Bonhoeffer would be guilty of his own critique against idealistic philosophy, leaving theological concepts in metaphysical terms. We have seen how crucial it was for Bonhoeffer to understand human existence as an existence coram. Whereas we clearly see his Lutheran notion of existence at work in Act and Being, we shall see more concretely how Bonhoeffer understood the 'pro me' character of Christ's person and work in the Christology

lectures. But first, we pause to examine a theological ambiguity which marked Bonhoeffer's life and theology in the late twenties.

#### D. Bonhoeffer's Ambiguous Understanding of God

A basic dynamic in Bonhoeffer's personal life yields a deeper dimension into his way of thinking: his personal struggle throughout his life with a tendency to have power over others.<sup>69</sup> A gifted, intelligent, and assiduous person, Bonhoeffer was nonetheless well aware of this tendency from early on. Utilizing a social structure like that of absolute rule and obedient service in one's theology can lead to dangerous conclusions. And in fact, an ambiguity and incongruence marked Bonhoeffer's young life in similar dialectical terms of power.

Serving as assistant pastor in a German-speaking parish in Barcelona in 1928, Bonhoeffer delivered several sermons and lectures. One of these lectures, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," demonstrates his loyalty at that time to the ancient earthly principle of the right of the stronger:

Voelker are like men. They are immature and need leadership; they grow to the bloom of youth, to manhood, and they die. In this there is nothing which is either good or evil in itself. Yet profound

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<sup>69</sup> Clifford Green identified "power as dominance" to be the problem in Bonhoeffer's personal life and in society as well at that time. In fact, Green went on to argue that precisely by dealing with dominating power in his theological and personal pilgrimage Bonhoeffer was able to celebrate human strength and maturity in his later theology.

Green documents the soteriological problem in Bonhoeffer's theology by focusing on the power of the ego. He identifies seven passages which together demonstrate the soteriological problem of power in the early theology. For more on the power of the ego as the specific problem in Bonhoeffer's early soteriology see Green, The Sociality of Christ and Humanity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Early Theology, 1927-1933, pp. 150-157.

questions are involved here, for growth requires expansion, and the increase of power involves pushing the other aside. This is the same in personal life and in the life of a Volk. But every Volk has a call of God in itself to make history, to enter into the contest of the life of Voelker. It is valid to hear this call out of the growing and becoming of the Volk as it occurs in the sight of God. God calls the Volk to manliness, to battle, and to victory. The strength and the power and the victory is from God who creates youth in man and Volk. God loves youth, for God himself is eternally young and strong and victorious. Anxiety and weakness should be defeated by courage and strength. Should not a Volk which has experienced the call of God to its own life, to its own youth and its own strength, should not such a Volk follow this call, even if this means treating as unimportant the life of other Voelker? God is the Lord of history. If a Volk humbly bows before this holy will which guides history, then in its youth and strength it can, with God, overcome the weak and the cowardly; for God will be with it.<sup>70</sup>

This surprising extract reveals a young Bonhoeffer espousing patent Lebensraum philosophy and a titanic ethics. It does not sound like the voice of the academic in Sanctorum Communio much less the one who was to espouse pacifism later. Indeed, Eberhard Bethge classified these statements as "dreadful" phrases which evidenced a young theologian who was not yet "talking his own language."<sup>71</sup> But one must remember the context in Germany at the time. As Bethge emphasized:

Such propositions were soon to become articles of faith among German nationalists in the Evangelical Church but, before they were interpreted anti-Semitic-ally and chauvinistically and became the hall-mark of

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<sup>70</sup> I have used the translation offered by Clifford Green. See Clifford Green, Bonhoeffer: The Sociality of Christ and Humanity, op. cit., pp. 161-62.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, Vol. 10, (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1991), pp. 339-40.

<sup>71</sup> Bethge, op. cit., p. 85-86.

right-wing extremism, they were also used by democrats and members of Stresemann's Volkspartei.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, Bonhoeffer shows himself a product of his culture, thinking in terms and categories which prevailed in German culture and philosophy.<sup>73</sup> One key way, then, the ambiguity of this early period manifests itself has to do with the way Bonhoeffer dealt in this old earthly theme of the right of the stronger over the weak. In Sanctorum Communio he articulated a scheme in which "stepping over" the other person reflects a sinful sociality at work in community whereas God's transforming love involves a community ruled by selfless service in mutual relation with the other. The lecture from Barcelona--in the name of national loyalty--however, maintains the opposite, advocating, even legitimating "pushing the other aside."

Certainly a disparity is apparent, and it revolves around the category of strength and weakness, power and defeat. At this point in his life (1927-1931/32) theology was an academic enterprise. But in 1931-32, a change occurred in his life which not only had far-reaching consequences for his attitude toward theology and the church as a whole, but it had everything to do with the way Bonhoeffer resolved such inconsistent views. Similar statements were never again to surface in his sermons or letters. As Bethge has noted, "[b]arely two years later he felt very uncomfortable at having expressed himself in this way about

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<sup>72</sup> Bethge, ibid., p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> The idea of the struggle for life as the natural basis of human existence came from Friedrich Naumann, on whom Bonhoeffer specifically relied in this address. The same motif is found in Max Weber. Cf. Bethge, p. 86 citing Friedrich Naumann, Briefe über Religion, (7th ed. 1917) pp. 61 ff.

burning ethical questions . . . . The theologia crucis and a wider view did their work."<sup>74</sup>

### III. "From Phraseology to Reality" (1931-32)

Bonhoeffer never considered himself one who went through many changes in his life, that is, momentous departures from one way of life or thinking to another--except for one. He said,

There are people who change, and others who can hardly change at all. I don't think I've ever changed very much, except perhaps at the time of my first impressions abroad and under the first conscious influence of father's personality. It was then that I turned from phraseology to reality . . . . Neither of us has really had a break in our lives. Of course, we have deliberately broken with a good deal, but that again is something quite different . . . . I sometimes used to long for something of the kind, but today I think differently about it.<sup>75</sup>

The change Bonhoeffer describes occurred when he was beginning to teach at Berlin University and work in the church and in the ecumenical movement. He openly referred to this change in a letter to a former girl-friend:

I plunged into my work in a very unchristian way. An . . . ambition that many noticed in me made my life difficult . . . . Then something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible . . . I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the Church, and talked and preached about it--but I had not yet become a Christian . . . I knew that at that time I turned the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage for myself . . . I pray to God that will never happen again. Also I

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<sup>74</sup> Bethge, op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>75</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of April 22, 1944, p. 277.

had never prayed, or prayed only very little. For all my loneliness, I was quite pleased with myself. Then the Bible, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from that. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly, and so have other people about me. It was a great liberation. It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the Church, and step by step it became plainer to me how far that must go. Then came the crisis of 1933. This strengthened me in it. . .

<sup>76</sup>

Ambition and self-advancement had been motivating forces in Bonhoeffer's life and theology up until this point. Then, in 1932, Christianity became real to him in a dynamic and living way.<sup>77</sup> Experiences he had had the previous two years contributed toward this change--particularly his year of study in the United States at Union Theological Seminary<sup>78</sup> and his work with the ecumenical movement. Bonhoeffer commented in his letter that he experienced "a great liberation." A significant aspect of what he was 'liberated from' was this basic struggle with his own power over others. Eberhard Bethge made it clear that Bonhoeffer's whole life was a struggle to come to terms with his own

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<sup>76</sup> Letter from Finkenwalde, January 27, 1936. Quoted from Bethge, op. cit., pp. 154, 155.

<sup>77</sup> One Bonhoeffer scholar refers to this change reflecting the fact that he was in the process of becoming a theologian of the cross. For him, "Theology was no longer discourse designed to show his academic acumen; it was a matter of faith and witness to the reality of God become man for him and the world." John W. DeGruchy, Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 22, 23.

<sup>78</sup> Bonhoeffer's relationship with Frank Fisher proved to be especially meaningful, one that yielded new vistas of life. Fisher introduced Bonhoeffer to the poor neighborhoods of Harlem, and through their friendship, Bonhoeffer regularly attended Abyssinian Baptist Church and taught Sunday School there. The experience had a profound effect on the young student; it was his first exposure to black culture, the socio-economic problems which were a part of that part of New York City, but most importantly, the vigor and life with which that congregation worshipped and lived together.



power in relation to others.<sup>79</sup> Although he was to continue struggling with his natural influence and strong personality and how it affected those he was around, his anxiety was partially salved.

That 1931-32 was a significant year for Bonhoeffer personally, and with far-reaching ramifications, is not a novel discovery. However, the evidence presents itself that a basic ambiguity which characterized Bonhoeffer's life and thought up until that point was partly resolved as a result of this 'change.' This discovery of Christianity in a way he had not known before marks a significant event in which his predilection for aggressive ambition and self-advancement was transformed at a root level. He was freed in his own life to focus on the church and his responsibility in it in a way which simply had not existed up until then. In Lutheran terms it was an example of being affected by God from the outside--the extra me nature of revelation--and relinquished from personal ambition and inward motivation.

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Eberhard Bethge, Saturday, November 20, 1993. See Appendix I.

One Bonhoeffer scholar highlighted the terms of Bonhoeffer's struggle as was seen in his 1932 lecture, "Thy Kingdom Come": ". . . the religion of the weak who would escape from the pains and pressures, the lies and catastrophes of the world into an eternal realm; and the religion of the strong, who would fight for God's cause; for religion and the church, for social and moral reconstruction, against the powers of the world and so build the kingdom of God. There are subtle ironies in both these forms. The yearning of the weak for eternal security is a religious attempt to prescribe to God just what human problems he shall solve and what comfort he shall offer. The striving of the strong to subdue the world for God is, as religious, not properly secular but secularist. It builds a kingdom with human power, but it does not allow God whom the Scriptures reveal to be lord of the world." Charles C. West, "Barth, Bonhoeffer and the Secularists on Human Religion: A Dialogue with Ernst Feil," unpublished paper presented at the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, August, 1992, p. 8.



This change is apparent and paralleled in the way Bonhoeffer spoke of God in terms of power and weakness from 1932 on. Alluding to it in Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer's paradigmatic way of thinking and approaching life--in terms of strength and weakness--came to be shaped more and more according to Luther's theologia crucis.<sup>80</sup> Rather than relinquish the paradigm out of which he had struggled and articulated an important part of his theological thought, it began to take on fresh meaning and relevance in his life and work, particularly in the way he understood God and God's presence in the world.

#### IV. The Christology Lectures (1933)

##### A. The Nature of Leadership and It's Authority: the Concept of Führer

Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures<sup>81</sup> provide us with the most complete picture of his Christological program between the years 1927-1933. It represents not only the high point of his academic career, but its end. As Bethge recalls,

Christology, which he had once regarded as having been so remarkably neglected in Holl's seminars on Luther, in the last resort lay behind the 'change' which he had referred to already in his 1931 lecture. It had

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<sup>80</sup> Bethge confirms this observation in his statement, noted earlier, regarding the retractable nature of Bonhoeffer's titanic statements made in Barcelona. "Barely two years later he felt very uncomfortable at having expressed himself" as he did in Barcelona. As Bethge put it, "[t]he theologia crucis and a wider view did their work." Bethge, op. cit., p. 87. "Barely two years later" would be the time of this "change."

<sup>81</sup> The Christology lectures are not based on Bonhoeffer's manuscript (which is lost), but are a reconstruction of students' notes from the seminar, delivered the summer of 1933. Bethge served as compiler and editor.

been the magnetic or even the explosive center of 'The Nature of the Church' of 1932; and it was to be the basis for ethics and serve as a defence against misuse of the concept of 'orders of creation' . . . . When the gales of 1933 swept over the universities, Bonhoeffer stuck to his post, unaffected by the line of the so-called "Springtime" in Germany. In autumn of 1933 Bonhoeffer gave up his post in anger and shame, determined to remain a theologian only in the service of the opposing Confessing Church. This most certainly meant the end of his academic career.<sup>82</sup>

Before Bonhoeffer left the university as Privatdozent, he had voiced his disapproval of the rising political power by radio address several months earlier. On February 1, 1933--the day after Hitler came to power as chancellor of Germany--Bonhoeffer broadcast a message entitled, "The Younger Generation's Changed View of the Concept of Führer." In the talk he analyzed the development of the concept of Führer, especially since the post-War Youth Movement.<sup>83</sup> Eberhard Bethge reminds us that,

It would be a misinterpretation . . . were we to pretend that his argument against the leadership cult was based on liberal, democratic ideas; it derived rather from a conservative notion of order, and this in spite of the idea simultaneously evolved of the breaking up of the 'penultimate' orders as opposed to the 'ultimate'. Bonhoeffer was concerned with the correct structuring of authority . . . .<sup>84</sup>

In the radio address Bonhoeffer warned his listeners in his final sentences, that should the leader:

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<sup>82</sup> Bethge, op. cit., p. 164; Bethge, "Turning Points in Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought," 23 Union Seminary Quarterly Review, (1967) pp. 7-8.

<sup>83</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 193.

<sup>84</sup> Bethge, ibid., p. 194.

allow himself to succumb to the wishes of those he leads, who will always seek to turn him into their idol, then the image of the leader will gradually become the image of the 'misleader' . . . This is the leader who makes an idol of himself and his office, and who thus mocks God.<sup>85</sup>

These last statements however were not communicated over the air waves because Bonhoeffer's microphone had been switched off.<sup>86</sup> As can be seen from the overall gist of the text, he did not shy away from expressing his political opinion from a theological perspective; further, he and his family had maintained a cautious, critical eye of Hitler and the Nazis from the beginning.

#### B. Christ as Mediator, Center, and Boundary

Six months after the radio address Bonhoeffer delivered his Christology lectures. This was an arduous task for him insofar as it required a synthesis of important themes and emphases which had marked his theology up until that time. He opened up the lectures stressing a theme in the form of a question which came to mark his life--"Who is Jesus Christ?"<sup>87</sup> For him this was the

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<sup>85</sup> Bethge, ibid..

<sup>86</sup> The exact reason for this has never been confirmed. Although it could have been due to an overrunning of his time, the script shows the syllables had been carefully counted and worked out. Whether the station had fallen under Hitler's control in two days is uncertain. But, what does remain is the fact that Bonhoeffer's most damning statements against Hitler were silenced and his talk cut short. Cf. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 194.

<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer's first theological letter from prison on 30 April 1944 reflects this lifelong quest, "What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today." See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters & Papers from Prison, Letter of 30 April 1944, p. 279. Although his theology began to take on a new

correct question for Christology, the question of faith and reason.<sup>88</sup> He went on to discuss a central theme during his early years--the pro me structure of Christ's existence. Due to the personal structure of Christ's presence in the church, only the "who" question could begin to comprehend the "pro me" structure of Christ's existence.<sup>89</sup>

Bonhoeffer discussed the person and place of Christ in triadic terms: Christ as Word, Sacrament and Community, not only incorporating the third concept into his thought, but making it the focus of his social understanding of revelation.<sup>90</sup> He enumerated the place of Christ as the center of human existence,

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dimension at this point in the letters from prison, the christological focus remained with him throughout his life.

<sup>88</sup> See Bonhoeffer, Christology, (London: Collins, 1966), p. 31; see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christologie. Vorlesung," Gesammelte Schriften, vol. III, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1960), p. 170.

<sup>89</sup> Clifford Green points out that the pro me structure of Bonhoeffer's christology not only is the personal structure of Christ's being, and the controlling motif in the various sections of his lectures, but it was Bonhoeffer's attempt at a reformulation of christology by interpreting traditional ontological concepts in terms of sociality, not in terms of self-understanding, as with Bultmann. Clifford Green, "Sociality and Church in Bonhoeffer's 1933 Christology," The Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 21, No. 4, (December 1968), p. 422. We shall see examine the consequences of this difference between the two theologians in chapter two.

<sup>90</sup> Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the relationship of the Word to the community show how he adopted as his own Karl Barth's conclusion that things can be known only by their like: "What does it mean that Christ as Word is also community? It means that the Logos of God has extension in space and time in and as the community. Christ, the Word, is spiritually and physically present. The Logos is not only the weak word of human teaching, doctrina; he is also the powerful Word of creation. He speaks, and thus creates the form of the community. The community is therefore not only the receiver of the Word of revelation; it is itself revelation and Word of God. Only in so far as it is itself the Word of God can it understand the Word of God. Revelation can be understood only on the basis of revelation." Bonhoeffer, Christology, p. 60; Gesammelte Schriften, p. 193. (emphasis original).

the center of history and as the mediator between God and nature. In this way, Bonhoeffer developed the theme of "barrier" which he had raised in Sanctorum Communio through the concept of Christ's place in the center and boundary of human history, relationship and existence.

In his notion of Christ existing as community, he called the church back to recognize the transcendent truth upon which it is based and which it can recognize only through the gift of faith. The community is not to be understood as a religious group, striving after God with its best intentions and efforts. Rather the opposite, Bonhoeffer reestablished the revelatory nature of the church, the divine truth upon which it has its existence.

Bonhoeffer accepted the church, not in "religious" terms as nineteenth century liberalism had done, but in accord with dialectical theology's tenet that revelation can be recognized only by revelation. Certainly, the difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer would be the former's rejection of the finitum capax infiniti and the latter's acceptance of it. It is important to note that Bonhoeffer showed a definite break with the liberal theology of Berlin and his advocacy of the revelatory theology advocated by Barth and the other dialectical theologians of the 1920's in his notion of Christ existing as community.

Christ as mediator--as center and boundary--increasingly became a signal motif in his theology, not only in the traditional Christological sense, i.e., the person and place of Christ, but in relation to his unfolding theologia crucis.<sup>91</sup> Such terms

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<sup>91</sup> One may understand the versatility of this concept in Bonhoeffer's work by looking to the way he utilized the schema of Christ the mediator, the center and boundary of human existence in Creation and Fall. We will examine these related motifs in depth in Chapter Three.

are wrapped up in his understanding of divine power and weakness, as is explicitly articulated in the Christology lectures.

In the lectures Bonhoeffer described various heresies which have occurred throughout church history. Before launching into the nature of positive Christology, he emphasized the role of critical Christology in relation to heretical notions about Jesus Christ. He said:

Critical christology is concerned with defining and guarding against a false Jesus Christ. Boundaries must be drawn to guard against both false theological content and inappropriate thought-forms. Any sentences which make statements about Jesus Christ with unequivocal directness are to be designated as having a false theological content.<sup>92</sup>

In this way, Bonhoeffer affirmed the Chalcedonian Definition as the highest form of christological expression. In it "the direct statement about Jesus Christ is superseded and split into two expressions which stand over against each other in contradiction."<sup>93</sup> Bonhoeffer believed strongly in preserving the mystery of the Incarnation in theology so that it would not fall victim to theological reductionism and caricature. The way he opened his course for the summer reflects how strongly he believed in preserving the indirect nature of the topic:

Teaching about Christ begins in silence . . . This has nothing to do with mystical silence . . . The church's silence is silence before the Word. In proclaiming the Word, the church must fall silent before the inexpressible: Let what cannot be spoken be worshipped in silence (Cyril of Alexandria). The spoken Word is the inexpressible: that which cannot be spoken is the Word . . . To speak of Christ means to

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<sup>92</sup> Bonhoeffer, Christology, p. 104.

<sup>93</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 106.



keep silent; to be silent about Christ means to speak. Proper speech of the Church is proclamation of Christ from a proper silence. . . . We must study christology in the humble silence of the worshipping community.<sup>94</sup>

Bonhoeffer's critical method lent itself naturally to his final emphasis in the lectures--positive Christology. His accent on silence and paradox intimated the kenotic terms he used to describe the christological enterprise.

### C. Kenotic Christology: Christ the Scandalon

Bonhoeffer advanced Luther's humiliation-exaltation christological formula in his final pages.<sup>95</sup> It is with this scheme that we once again see the familiar terms of God's weakness and God's hiddenness raised as paradigmatic for understanding the Incarnate One. He defines who Jesus Christ is and how one may correctly speak of Him:

So if we speak of Jesus Christ as God, we may not speak of him as the representative of an idea of God who possesses the properties of omniscience and omnipotence (there is no such thing as this abstract divine nature!); we must speak of his weakness, of the cradle and the cross; and this man is no abstract God.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 27; Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. III, p. 167. The underlined portion of the quotation is the author's translation.

<sup>95</sup> The summer term ended before Bonhoeffer had completed his topic on Positive Christology. According to his notes, he was to include a section entitled "The Eternal Christ." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 118.

<sup>96</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 108-09; Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. III, p. 233.



Bonhoeffer echoes Luther before him by pointing to the mundane, human image of Jesus as the signpost of God's presence in the world. He is the weak man among sinners.

Bonhoeffer comes to the heart of the matter by pointing out how the historical ambiguity of Jesus Christ is ultimately a stumbling block for people. For Bonhoeffer, the authority Jesus assumes is the essence of the scandal. In forgiving others' sins, Jesus makes a claim to be the Son of God. As Bonhoeffer put it,

Had he done the signs which were demanded of him for proof, men would probably have believed in him. But just when it came to the point of signs and wonders, he retreated into his incognito and refused to give any visible attestation. In this way he causes the offence. Had he answered the question put to him about his authority with a miracle, then it would not be true that he was wholly man as we are. At the decisive moment, in the question about Christ, the exception would have been made. So the nearer the revelation, the thicker the concealment must be; the more urgent the question about Christ, the more impenetrable the incognito.<sup>97</sup>

Whereas Bonhoeffer had just finished emphasizing the paradox of the incarnation by affirming the Chalcedonian definition, he paused to clarify the nature of God's hiddenness. Christ enters the world as the humiliated God-man. The humiliation resides in the entire Incarnate One, not the humanity of Christ. He enters the world incognito, and this hiddenness manifests itself in the fact that:

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<sup>97</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 114; Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, vol., III, p. 238. The underlined portion of the quotation is the author's translation. John Bowden's translation in Christology reads, "In this way he makes a stumbling block." The original German reads, "So schafft er das Ärgernis."

He was really made sin for us, and crucified as the peccator pessimus. Luther says that he is himself robber, murderer and adulterer as we are, for he bears our sin, and in so doing describes the ultimate foundation of all christological statements. As the one who bears our sin, and no one else, he is sinless, holy, eternal, the Lord, the Son of the Father.<sup>98</sup>

Bonhoeffer uses classical Lutheran language here, marked by paradox, centering around God's incognito. It is nothing other than a kenotic christology. The vicarious principle surfaces again as a foundational motif, this time with regard to christology. The social concept of Christ bearing persons' sins and carrying them as if they were his own is the bedrock upon which Bonhoeffer built his Lutheran christology.

Of interest to us is the fact that the scandalous nature of Christ is paradoxical. Underneath the weakness, suffering and sacrifice of Christ's passion is the power and strength of the One who alone forgives sin. On the surface, a beaten man dies a meaningless death, having made far-fetched claims about himself. Underneath is the reality that the Son of God took upon himself all human stain, providing new life for the very ones who deserve death. While such a paradigm might seem far from novel and a mere continuation of Luther's christological model, one must not forget the paradigm that was central for Bonhoeffer himself. As he put it,

"[w]e cannot get [a]round the scandal by means of the resurrection. We have the Exalted One only as the Crucified, the Sinless One only as the one laden with guilt, the Risen One only as the Humiliated One. . . . Even the resurrection is not a penetration of the incognito. Even the resurrection is ambiguous. It is

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<sup>98</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 112-13; Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, p. 237.

only believed in where the stumbling block of Jesus has not been removed."<sup>99</sup>

The German pastor now spoke unqualifiably of Christ in terms of weakness, paradox, and scandal. Christ was the man for others, intimately involved in the lives of others, demonstrating his power in this paradigmatic way. Omnipotence is characterized by Bonhoeffer as an abstract concept. Divine authority takes the form of Christ's self-giving of himself for others. We already know the social concept of vicarious action serves as the cornerstone for Bonhoeffer's christology as a whole. Now we begin to see the vicarious principle as an indication of God's hidden authority and power in the world. It is expressed in classically paradoxical Lutheran terms, following the lines of a theology of the cross. Whereas Bonhoeffer expressed his christology in these traditional terms in 1933, it settled as a thematic which was to unfold in more depth in the years ahead. He had moved beyond a theological and personal ambiguity, more certain of the serious consequences such an understanding of God in the world could have in his own context.

#### V. The Cost of Discipleship (1937)

The theology of the cross is a theological legacy having its roots in Luther and Kierkegaard, extending generally from a Pauline tradition. In The Cost of Discipleship this lineage shines forth in clear expression. We see the main characteristics of Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis converge in a way which

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<sup>99</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 116; Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, p. 240.

demonstrates his loyalty to Luther as well as his creativity in working out of such a scheme. Part of that creativity involves the way divine power and weakness function as controlling motifs in Bonhoeffer's cross-centered theology.

Before we examine the way the theologia crucis reaches expression in The Cost of Discipleship, we shall list once again the five essential aspects of a theology of the cross:

- 1) The theology of the cross as a theology of revelation, standing in sharp antithesis to speculation;
- 2) God's revelation as an indirect, concealed revelation;
- 3) God's revelation as recognized not in works but in suffering;
- 4) Knowledge of God who is hidden in his revelation as a matter of faith; and
- 5) The manner in which God is known as reflected in the practical thought of suffering.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Von Loewenich, ibid., p. 22. Alister McGrath lists the same five characteristics, drawing from von Loewenich and providing much greater annotation. See Alister McGrath, Luther's Theology of the Cross, pp. 149-51. Larry Rasmussen offers a somewhat different, more politically sensitive, enumeration. According to Rasmussen, the essential elements of the theologia crucis are: (1) God does not want to be known by that which is invisible, but only by what God has disclosed; (2) The knowledge of God, veiled in revelation, is a matter of faith. What is known is God's humanity and weakness revealed through the cross; (3) As revealed, God is, at the same time, hidden. The revealed God is hidden under suffering and the cross; (4) This means that the revelation of God is apprehended in suffering and the cross, understood as Christ's passion and at the same time as the Christian's suffering and cross. The suffering of Christ and of the Christian belong together; (5) This way of knowing God shows the necessity of suffering and excludes all works-righteousness. Suffering is most precious while works-righteousness is useless and deceptive; God accepts only those who are lowly and despised. See Larry Rasmussen with Renate Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer--His Significance for North Americans, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 151.

Bonhoeffer dealt with these aspects of Luther's theology of the cross over a five year period. Although The Cost of Discipleship appeared in print in late 1937, they reflect thought from as early as 1932. Thus, his time as director of a clandestine seminary at Zingst and Finkenwalde and the communal life he experienced there provide the context out of which he developed these motifs. Also, the church struggle (Kirchenkampf) going on at the time is an essential ingredient to the contextual background against which Bonhoeffer wrote. We turn now to see how these elements impinged on Bonhoeffer's theology during this middle period of his thought.

If one were to ask "Who is Jesus Christ for us in The Cost of Discipleship?" the answer would be: a strong, commanding Christ who calls for obedience. Indeed, the Christ of The Cost of Discipleship stands as a militant figure in seeming contradiction to the christological image of the "man for others" Bonhoeffer had described in 1933. However, the context of the times yields crucial insight and understanding into Bonhoeffer's use of such christological imagery.

The Cost of Discipleship was written over a period of years, 1932-1937, in the midst of the church struggle (Kirchenkampf) when the Confessing Church was struggling to iron out its position. The force of Bonhoeffer's themes in The Cost of Discipleship are due to the tumultuous year 1933. However, their conception dates back to 1932. Eberhard Bethge recounts the appearance of certain themes during that year: "obedience as action," the idea of "cheap grace." Also, the impact of Bonhoeffer's year at Union Theological Seminary (1930-31) is to

be noted, where he struggled with the traditional Lutheran interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>101</sup>

Bonhoeffer was writing The Cost of Discipleship at a time when he felt the Church in Germany was giving in to a "cheap" understanding of God's grace, thereby extricating itself from the costly obedience he believed was demanded under Hitler's threat.<sup>102</sup> This partly explains the militant Christ he held up at this point in his writings. The theologia crucis is strong in Letters and Papers from Prison as well as in The Cost of Discipleship; whereas both differ in their terminology and picture of Jesus, they depict the same theology of the cross. We turn to see how such a diverse theological paradigm is possible.

#### A. The Call

Bonhoeffer did not write The Cost of Discipleship with a view to it becoming a book. It began in the form of lectures he delivered on the theme of discipleship and the Sermon on the Mount. Eberhard Bethge recounts how the German pastor began his lectures to the seminarians at Zingst by investigating the nature of 'the call' rather than with what now constitutes the opening

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<sup>101</sup> See Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pp. 375-377. See also Bonhoeffer's letter to Edwin Sutz dated 28 April, 1934. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. I, pp. 39-41.

<sup>102</sup> Indeed, Bonhoeffer spoke of the need for the Confessing Church to be converted rather than Hitler. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1958), ed. Eberhard Bethge, vol. I, pp. 42-43. See also Ernst Feil, The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, trans. Martin Rumscheidt, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 77.

pages of The Cost of Discipleship, the concept of 'costly grace.'<sup>103</sup> This is how he spoke of Christian discipleship, in the first instance, in terms of 'the call.' The call from God to persons is best designated as a social paradigm for understanding Christian discipleship.

For Bonhoeffer, the call can be defined both positively and negatively. In the positive sense, we are called to follow Christ. We are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person.<sup>104</sup> Discipleship is nothing less than a personal relationship between the living Christ and the obedient disciple, and Bonhoeffer repeatedly lays the emphasis on the fact that discipleship is a Christological fact, not an anthropological one.<sup>105</sup> Delimiting the call negatively, the call is not an

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<sup>103</sup> It is worthy to note that the German phrase teure Gnade has a connotation that extends beyond the pithy phrase traditionally associated with it, 'costly grace.' It literally means 'grace sold on the market like cheap-jack's wares.' See Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 369.

<sup>104</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 63.

<sup>105</sup> "Discipleship means adherence to Jesus Christ alone, and immediately." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 136.



abstraction,<sup>106</sup> neither is it voluntarism<sup>107</sup> nor a facere quod in se est<sup>108</sup>.

In his section entitled "The Call to Discipleship" the call to follow Jesus Christ takes on the form of a commandment. Jesus takes up his claim to divine authority and pronounces the last word.<sup>109</sup> While Christ is in perfect union with God, the disciple is commanded to enter into perfect fellowship or communion with Christ. That is "the sum of the commandments--to live in fellowship with Christ."<sup>110</sup>

While Bonhoeffer's image of Christ is a harsh one, it is crucial to recognize the sociality underlying the relationship between Christ and the disciple. In his exegesis of Matthew 19:16-22, the story of the rich young man, Bonhoeffer stresses the fact that the man is encountering an inescapable relationship between the Lord and the would-be disciple. The point, for Bonhoeffer, is not to focus on the call or command to obey, nor the actual following of the disciple, but the fact that it is

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<sup>106</sup> "Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 64.

<sup>107</sup> "No man can choose such a life for himself. No man can call himself to such a destiny, says Jesus . . . [t]he gulf between a voluntary offer to follow and genuine discipleship is clear." Bonhoeffer goes on to say that insisting on one's own terms in discipleship is to reduce discipleship to the level of human understanding. This cannot be so because it is only a gracious mandate which comes exclusively from Christ. Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 65-66.

<sup>108</sup> "Obedience to the call of Jesus never lies within our own power . . . [t]he step into the situation where faith is possible is not an offer which we can make to Jesus, but always his gracious offer to us." Bonhoeffer, ibid. pp. 93-94.

<sup>109</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 82.

<sup>110</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

christ who calls the disciple to obey him. The disciple stands face to face with the living Lord; it is the ultimate encounter.<sup>111</sup>

The harsh image of the commanding Christ is complemented by the subjective side of discipleship--Christian obedience. For Bonhoeffer, the nature of Christian discipleship is a following at best.<sup>112</sup> The dynamic nature of following Christ lay in the fact that it cannot be reduced to an intelligible program, goal or ideal to strive after. Indeed, following Jesus Christ is void of all content.<sup>113</sup> This can only be described as a dynamically social, incarnational definition of Christian obedience. Bonhoeffer remained consistently christological in his description of the human aspect of discipleship by focusing on the extra nos nature of any Christian action.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, we have a christological scheme in The Cost of Discipleship where Jesus Christ issues a call to obedience, in the form of a command, to persons who are to obey spontaneously.

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<sup>111</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p.73-84.

<sup>112</sup> "Because the Son of God became Man, because he is the Mediator, for that reason alone the only true relation we can have with him is to follow him. Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 64.

<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 62.

<sup>114</sup> It is part of Bonhoeffer's theological genius to be able to emphasize the subjective side of discipleship (Christian obedience, or following) in general while simultaneously highlighting the objective side (Christ's merit) in particular. That he was under the influence of the 'Word of God' theology is clear here.

Karl Barth so agreed with the way Bonhoeffer explicated the nature of Christian discipleship that he gave high praise to the German pastor in his Church Dogmatics saying " . . . I cannot hope to say anything better on the subject than what is said here by a man who, having written on discipleship, was ready to achieve it in his own life, and did in his own way achieve it even to the point of death." See Karl Barth, "The Call to Discipleship," Church Dogmatics, IV/2, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), pp. 533-34.

such a concept of discipleship, regardless of its dynamic sociality, can connote a tyrannical overtone such that it might not seem viable for its overly strict, conservative concept of ordered relationship between Christ and follower. However, if we leave our examination of Bonhoeffer's christology in The Cost of Discipleship there, it remains a fragmented caricature of a christological authority which is much more diverse and profound in character.

#### B. The Extra Nos Character of Faith

For the German pastor, the extra nos character of faith is key. Faith is never a human response to God's grace which is offered to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Faith itself is a work which is created in us by the present Christ. It is always a work which lies outside our cognitive grasp, always an actus directus. The extra nos character of faith in Christ the Mediator are key christological terms for Bonhoeffer.<sup>115</sup> With the notion of Christ the Mediator and the extra nos character of faith we have hit upon a pivotal aspect of Bonhoeffer's theology in The Cost of Discipleship. Indeed, this concept is a turning point and key indicator of his theologia crucis.

Bonhoeffer spoke of the barrier Christ represents between the world and persons. He said,

By calling us he has cut us off from all immediacy with the things of this world. He wants to be the center, through him alone all things shall come to pass. He stands between us and God, and for that very

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<sup>115</sup> Bonhoeffer's section "Discipleship and the Individual" discusses this pivotal theme, Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 105-11.

reason he stands between us and all other men and things. He is the Mediator, not only between God and man, but between man and man, between man and reality.<sup>116</sup>

In the call to discipleship it is not a duty to which one is called, but a strict adherence to the person of Christ. As the Mediator, Christ divides by standing in the center between individuals and God and between persons themselves. "Since his coming man has no immediate relationship of his own any more to anything, neither to God nor to the world."<sup>117</sup> Such an emphasis on the lack of immediacy, particularly between God and the world, has caused many to interpret Bonhoeffer's statements in The Cost of Discipleship as other-worldly. The Christian community appears as an isolated, inward-looking institution that has no connection with the world.<sup>118</sup> However, the deceptive nature of the language in The Cost of Discipleship is most apparent here.

One of the chief characteristics of a theology of the cross is the use of paradoxical language. Bonhoeffer was not working on a dualistic notion of God and world, with the church as a community to be separated in a social sense from the world. He was after something altogether different. For him, there are two reasons why direct relationships between persons are impossible. First, the nature of reality is such that individuals only have real contact with one another through the Mediator of all

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<sup>116</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 106 (Emphasis added).

<sup>117</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 106-07.

<sup>118</sup> "There can be no real attachment to the given creation, no genuine responsibility in the world, unless we recognize the breach which already separates us from it." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 110.

relationships, Jesus Christ. Social reality is bound by a Christological cohesion which holds it together.

Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate realities of their own, not in their family relationships nor in the ties with their nation nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife, the individual and the nation, stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not.<sup>119</sup>

The second reason direct relationship is impossible is the fact that each person bears an "incognito":

However loving and sympathetic we try to be, however sound our psychology, however frank and open our behavior, we cannot penetrate the incognito of the other man, for there are no direct relationships, not even between soul and soul.<sup>120</sup>

In the end, each of us faces a breach with all our immediate relationships. It may take the form of an external breach (as with family and nation) or it may be a hidden and a secret one,<sup>121</sup> but either way, the only relationship characterized by immediacy exists between God and his Son, and between the same Christ, the individual and the Christian community. Once this fundamental barrier is acknowledged, we are then in a position to establish right relation between ourselves, God and the world.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 108.

<sup>120</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 110.

<sup>121</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

<sup>122</sup> "There can be no genuine thanksgiving for the blessings of nation, family, history and nature without that heart-felt penitence which gives the glory to Christ alone above all else. There can be no real attachment to the given creation, no genuine

### C. The Paradoxical Use of Language

Bonhoeffer advances several theological concepts in The Cost of Discipleship that are deceptive and susceptible to misinterpretation unless one acknowledges two very important factors motivating them. The first reason is contextual. While it sounds like he is rejecting the world and earth,<sup>123</sup> he is rather suggesting the church must be a counter-cultural symbol against Nazi culture. He felt the Nazi state had interfered in the life of the church and church members failed to oppose this incursion. As a result, Christians had accommodated and come to live like the "the rest of the world."<sup>124</sup> Now, he was rallying them to recognize the fundamental breach that existed between Hitler's

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responsibility in the world, unless we recognize the breach which already separates us from it. There can be no genuine love of the world except the love wherewith God loved it in Jesus Christ." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 110.

<sup>123</sup> "The call of Jesus Christ teaches us that our relation to the world has been built on an illusion. All the time we thought we had enjoyed a direct relation with men and things. . . . Now we learn that in the most intimate relationships of life . . . direct relationships are impossible." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 108.

<sup>124</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 46. "The antithesis between Christian life and the life of the bourgeois respectability is at an end. The Christian life comes to mean nothing more than living in the world and as the world in being no different from the world, in fact, in being prohibited from being different from the world for the sake of grace. The upshot of it all is that my only duty as a Christian is to leave the world for an hour or so on a Sunday morning and to go to church to be assured that all my sins are forgiven. I need no longer try to follow Christ, for cheap grace, the bitterest foe of discipleship, which true discipleship must loathe and detest, has freed me from that." Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 54-55. This point is emphasized and discussed in Patricia A. Schoelles, Discipleship and Social Ethics: A Christian View of Social Ethics in the Light of the Work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Juergen Moltmann and Johannes B. Metz, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, Department of Theology, Notre Dame, Indiana, May, 1984, p. 80 (unpublished manuscript on file at Bonhoeffer Archive, Union Theological Seminary).



program for the church and their own allegiance to one Lord, one leader--Jesus Christ. Thus, the separatist language which marks Bonhoeffer's discussion about the relationship between the God, the church, and the world.

The second reason for Bonhoeffer's deceptive use of language in The Cost of Discipleship is a more strictly theological one. He is speaking the language of a theologia crucis by using several theological terms and concepts in the paradoxical way he discusses the hiddenness existing between God, persons, and the world. The "incognito" that exists between persons so that social immediacy is impossible bears this out. He stresses the hidden sociality which marks every relationship, a boundary or limit which persons constantly try to breach in order to gain direct access to God or another. Bonhoeffer unqualifiably refutes such an idea at its base with his notion of Christ the Mediator--the sole source of accession between God and the world and between persons.

Throughout his life Bonhoeffer held to this Lutheran theological maxim--that the finite bears or carries the infinite. God is in the facts himself. Bonhoeffer's language reflects this in several ways in The Cost of Discipleship. In his description of Levi leaving his fishing nets to follow Jesus, we see this concept as work. His ethical notion of transcendence--finding God in the neighbor at hand--reflects this paradoxical motif. Bonhoeffer was looking for a way to describe exactly how one is to have both feet planted firmly on the ground in order to experience God's presence.

The paradox lay in the fact that once this ultimate breach or barrier is acknowledged, persons are freed to enter into the kind of relationship God makes possible through his Son Jesus



Christ. Rather than retreat into a corner, the church is to enter into full relationship with the world in which it finds itself. Further, this Mediator stands in the center between my neighbor and myself. He divides, but he also unites.<sup>125</sup> The principle underlying this profound, hidden aspect of sociality is the finitum capax infiniti.

Hidden behind the Christ who is a barrier between God and persons and between persons themselves, stands the Mediator who steps toward persons, calling them to follow and enter into a profound relationship between God and one another. This paradox is none other than the theologia crucis. The finitum capax infiniti reaches its expression in the notion of Christ the Mediator. But the paradoxical Christological expression goes much further. Bonhoeffer had much more to say about what this Mediator looked like in the world.

Just as discipleship involves following Jesus, suffering involves the same passive element at the heart of Christian activity. Suffering is a passio passiva--it has already been performed by Christ for us. We have only to follow in the footsteps of the cross.<sup>126</sup> Bonhoeffer acknowledges a passio activa, or voluntary suffering, in the Christian life as well. This refers to asceticism and imitations of the suffering of

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<sup>125</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, p. 112.

<sup>126</sup> "The disciple community does not shake off sorrow as though it were no concern of its own, but willingly bears it. And in this way they show how close are the bonds which bind them to the rest of humanity. But at the same time they do not go out of their way to look for suffering, or try to contract out of it by adopting an attitude of contempt and disdain. They simply bear the suffering which comes their way as they try to follow Jesus Christ, and bear it for his sake." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 122. Further, he notes that the Christian is not worn down by sorrow because it is borne in the strength of Christ who bears him or her up.

Christ. He identifies the danger in assigning too much significance to this type of Christian obedience.<sup>127</sup>

Discipleship involves adherence to the suffering Christ. Bonhoeffer said, "Discipleship means adherence to the person of Jesus, and therefore submission to the law of Christ which is the law of the cross."<sup>128</sup> A theology of the cross incorporates the notion of Christ's suffering, as well as that of the Christian, as one of its signposts. Bonhoeffer discusses suffering<sup>129</sup> in terms of taking on the sins of others as one's own and forgiving them. This kind of suffering is reminiscent of Luther's tropological interpretation of Christ's atoning act on the cross. Bonhoeffer goes beyond Luther in stating that Christians are called upon to suffer the sins of others and to forgive them. This is his rendition of Luther's "being a Christ" to another. We see here a fascinating explication of what bearing another's sins as suffering means:

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<sup>127</sup> "There is always the danger that in our asceticism we shall be tempted to imitate the sufferings of Christ. This is a pious but godless ambition, for beneath it there always lurks the notion that it is possible for us to step into Christ's shoes and suffer as he did and kill the old Adam . . . [t]he motive of asceticism was more limited--to equip us for better service and deeper humiliation. But it can only do that so long as it takes the suffering of Christ as its basis; if not, it degenerates into a dreadful parody of the Lord's own passion." Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, pp. 190-91.

<sup>128</sup> Further, "Jesus must therefore make it clear beyond all doubt that the 'must' of suffering applies to his disciples no less than to himself. Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord's suffering and rejection and crucifixion . . . . Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship." Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, pp. 96, 100.

<sup>129</sup> He delimits suffering into two categories: (1) the Christian's dying to the attachments of this world, and (2) suffering others' sins and forgiving them. We shall examine the second.

While it is true that only the sufferings of Christ are a means of atonement, yet since he has suffered for and borne the sins of the whole world and shares with his disciples the fruits of his passion, the Christian also has to undergo temptation, he too has to bear the sins of others . . . [a]s Christ bears our burdens, so ought we to bear the burdens of our fellow-men . . . [m]y brother's burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it in the power of the cross of Christ in which I now share . . . [f]orgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear.<sup>130</sup>

Two exceptional things stand out in this notion of bearing another's sins and forgiveness as suffering. Forgiveness is transformed from being understood as a cheap, individualistic commodity to a costly, relational reality. Secondly, suffering is an extra nos concept. Suffering, in terms of forgiveness, is considered by reference to the other person rather than oneself. This is yet another way Bonhoeffer shows the extra nos character of human existence. In this notion of suffering, we are determined by a presence outside ourselves. It is interesting to note that suffering, while being characterized as a "spiritual" reality (forgiveness of sin), is still discussed in concrete terms.<sup>131</sup>

Christian suffering is a suffering under the cross. It is a cross that waits for everyone and which is destined and appointed by God.<sup>132</sup> Suffering stands at the heart of the cross--"Suffering and rejection sum up the whole cross of Jesus. To

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<sup>130</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 100.

<sup>131</sup> "My brother's burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 100.

<sup>132</sup> "Only a man thus totally committed in discipleship can experience the meaning of the cross." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 98.

die on the cross means to die despised and rejected of men."<sup>133</sup> The cross carries specific meaning, and it is here that the radical reversal of human assumptions occurs.<sup>134</sup> This is a fundamental aspect of a cross-centered theology.

In Bonhoeffer's understanding of suffering under the cross we see a reversal. Suffering was described in extra nos terminology. He rejected suffering as a self-centered reality, focusing on the claim the other person places on the life of the Christian. Further, rather than highlight the sorrow and pain involved in the notion of suffering, Bonhoeffer's leitmotif was the bearing of others' sins and forgiveness. Theological concepts, like forgiveness and suffering, which easily tend to be interpreted in an individualistic, inward-looking way, are turned outward, and interpreted from the perspective of the other person with whom we stand in relation. This is just one aspect of the reversal of assumptions that occurs as a result of Bonhoeffer's theology formulated on the basis of the cross. No other Christian symbol offers such thorough-going critique and re-evaluation, and it is here that Bonhoeffer's theology gains an added measure of credibility for late twentieth century Western theology.

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<sup>133</sup> Bonhoeffer makes an interesting distinction here between suffering and rejection. He says, "Had he only suffered, Jesus might still have been applauded as the Messiah. All the sympathy and admiration of the world might have been focused on his passion. It could have been viewed as a tragedy with its own intrinsic value, dignity and honor. But in the passion Jesus is a rejected Messiah. His rejection robs the passion of its halo of glory. It must be a passion without honor. CD, pp. 95, 96. Here, Bonhoeffer clearly demonstrates that his is a theology of the cross, against any form of a theologia gloriae, just as Luther before him.

<sup>134</sup> "[A] re-evaluation of all values results from the cross." Von Loewenich, op. cit., p. 12.

Perhaps the most significant element of the paradoxical nature of theology conditioned by the cross is the hidden-yet-revealed nature of revelation. That the notion of the hidden God is fundamental for Luther is a given fact. Bonhoeffer follows in Luther's footsteps in The Cost of Discipleship, even though it is not until the Letters and Papers from Prison that we see a more categorical, explicit theme of the hidden God unfold. As a theme, however, hiddenness prevails in Bonhoeffer's thought in a way that was not true for Luther. It extends to more categories than theology proper and the nature of faith--that is, Luther's earlier eschatological definition of faith. Given his perennial search for the concrete nature of revelation and faith, it is inevitable that visibility and empirical reality are complementary themes in Bonhoeffer. These complementary themes yield insight into a fresh, provocative dimension to Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross. But first we must look to the way he understands the motif of hiddenness in The Cost of Discipleship.

Hiddenness is discussed in several contexts in The Cost of Discipleship. Bonhoeffer designates three chapters to this theme: "The Hidden Righteousness", "The Hiddenness of Prayer", and "The Hiddenness of the Devout Life." In these sections of the book, hiddenness is crucial to the fabric of Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis. For example, in "The Hidden Righteousness" Bonhoeffer talks about a "voluntary blindness" in which the follower's discipleship is visible to others but is hidden from the follower.<sup>135</sup> Hiddenness from self, not the world, shows the

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<sup>135</sup> "Christ's virtue, the virtue of discipleship, can only be accomplished so long as you are entirely unconscious of what you are doing. The genuine work of love is always a hidden work. This voluntary blindness in the Christian (which is really sight illuminated by Christ) is his certainty, and the fact that his life is hidden from his sight is the ground of his assurance.

selflessness at the heart of Bonhoeffer's schema. Whereas self-denial represents the negative side of the equation, christological awareness and openness to others positively states the hidden character of righteousness.

In addition to these three explicit sections on hiddenness, this theme is discussed in other contexts. We have already described the hiddenness of the other person--the incognito of the other and the indirect sociality between persons--as well as the hiddenness of suffering,<sup>136</sup> particularly as Bonhoeffer draws such a concept within the purview of the hiddenness of the cross itself.<sup>137</sup>

What is the perisson? It is the love of Jesus Christ himself, who went patiently and obediently to the cross--it is in fact the cross itself. The cross is the differential of the Christian religion, the power which enables the Christian to transcend the world and to win the victory. The passio in the love of the Crucified is the supreme expression of the 'extraordinary' quality of the Christian life.<sup>138</sup>

The visible and the invisible aspects of the life of discipleship are combined because both are defined as the cross of Christ beneath which the disciples stand. The cross is at once the

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Thus hiddenness has its counterpart in manifestation." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 177; see also, ibid., p. 97.

<sup>136</sup> To restate in brief, this hiddenness has to do with the fact that while from the outside, on the face of it, bearing the suffering of the cross might appear too heavy, in reality it is light because it is Christ's cross and his bearing which supplies our strength. The paradox lay also in the fact that our "small" human burdens, which might appear so light in comparison to Christ's demands, actually are an unceasing burden which we cannot cast off on our own.

<sup>137</sup> The hiddenness yet visibility of the cross is discussed in most concentrated form in the section "The Enemy--The 'Extraordinary'." Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 162-71.

<sup>138</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 170; see also ibid., p. 171.



necessary, the hidden, and the visible.<sup>139</sup> As such a paradoxical reality, the cross is characterized by yet a more specific paradox--its power and weakness. It is this more exact, telling contrast that we examine now and which reveals a secret at the heart of Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross.

Power, as a topic, occurs explicitly throughout The Cost of Discipleship. Bonhoeffer discusses theological power in an exegetical section entitled "The Apostles."<sup>140</sup> In other parts of the book, the powers of Satan are identified,<sup>141</sup> yet Bonhoeffer confidently speaks of the sovereignty of God's power.<sup>142</sup> This sovereignty is discussed often in characteristic Lutheran terms, referring to civil power under the authority of God. Finally, the power of the world and the power of the church are teleologically contrasted.<sup>143</sup>

Bonhoeffer spoke of power as ruling in a negative fashion in The Cost of Discipleship. Listing whoredom as the first sin against God--idolatry--he saw it as the resurgence of "the old Adam," the desire to be as God, to be the creator of life, to rule rather than to serve.<sup>144</sup> In this way, Bonhoeffer took Luther's notion of sin as cor curvatus in se and gave it an

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<sup>139</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 176.

<sup>140</sup> The distinction between Christ's power and that of the devil is made clear here. See Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 226-27.

<sup>141</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 232, 329.

<sup>142</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 293, 295.

<sup>143</sup> See Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 121.

<sup>144</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 318-320. Bonhoeffer's connection between whoremongering and covetousness is profound: "With whoredom covetousness is closely associated . . . [t]he whoremonger desires to possess another person, the covetous man material things. The covetous man seeks dominion and power, but only to become a slave of the world on which he has set his heart." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 319.

ethical interpretation. Power appears a negative category for the German pastor until we see how he understood God's power hidden in the weak Word.

For Bonhoeffer, divine power and weakness are theological concepts which must be considered together in order to understand them aright. The power and the weakness of the Word of God are simultaneous.<sup>145</sup>

If they [the disciples] do not realize this weakness of the Word, they have failed to perceive the mystery of the divine humility. The same weak Word which is content to endure the gainsaying of sinners is also the mighty Word of mercy which can convert the hearts of sinners. Its strength is veiled in weakness; if it came in power that would mean that the day of judgment has arrived.<sup>146</sup>

He finds meaning for both power and weakness in the theologia crucis, defining them in relation to one another. As Eberhard Bethge stated, "[t]he belief in the power of weakness was one of Bonhoeffer's most basic insights, and he was to hold to it throughout his theological life."<sup>147</sup> We have already seen how as early as Sanctorum Communio Bonhoeffer worked from the theological presupposition that "God's freedom confines itself within the limits of a weak human community of individuals."<sup>148</sup> Now we see how weakness expands as a theological motif in The Cost of Discipleship, this time with reference to the Word of God. We also see how God's power begins to take on new meaning in terms of the weak Word.

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<sup>145</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 234; see also ibid., p. 264.

<sup>146</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 207.

<sup>147</sup> Bethge, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

Bonhoeffer contrasts the weak Word with the power of ideology:

The Word recognizes opposition when it meets it, and it is prepared to suffer it. It is a hard lesson, but a true one, that the gospel, unlike an ideology, reckons with impossibilities. The Word is weaker than any ideology, and this means that with only the gospel at their command the witnesses are weaker than the propagandists of an opinion. But although they are weak, they are ready to suffer with the Word and so are free from that morbid restlessness which is so characteristic of fanaticism.<sup>149</sup>

He succeeds in making the point that the Word's power cannot be measured because it is not a quantifiable entity or program. Its power resides in the content of the Word itself, not the extent to which this Word comes to be accepted, or even coerced, on others as an idea or ideology must be in order to be effective. The weakness of the Gospel lies in the very fact that persons may choose to reject it. Its power is defined in terms of its message and Person who alone has the ability to enter the lives and hearts of people and transform them.

Regarding Bonhoeffer's distinction between the Word and ideology, Bethge said:

The Word of Christ must not be mistaken for triumphant, all-pervasive conviction, for it can also respect the impossible, take into account the barriers which it encounters; it esteems the individual--the more so when that individual disagrees. The idea, on the other hand, invades the individual, and nothing is impossible to a programme. But the Word incarnate is content to be despised and rejected . . . [i]n the interpretation of the weak Word we are close to the profoundest thought ever expressed by Bonhoeffer:

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<sup>149</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 207.

discipleship as participation in Christ's sufferings for others, as communion with the Crucified.<sup>150</sup>

By such a strong adherence to the vulnerability of the Word in the hands of the world, Bonhoeffer shows signs of his profound understanding of power in terms of weakness--the power of weakness. Such power can be none other than the power of the cross because it takes into account rejection at its base. Once again, we are reminded of the hiddenness of the cross. Bonhoeffer says, "The cross is the only power in the world which proves that suffering love can avenge and vanquish evil."<sup>151</sup> Suffering love conquers by asking how to serve and not how it can be served.<sup>152</sup>

Bonhoeffer's social understanding of discipleship proves to be a hermeneutical key to this new definition of power, because we see a fundamental change of position being posited. In The Cost of Discipleship, he addresses the person as a responsible individual who is fundamentally determined by the existence of the other. Power is not a motif having to do with self-determination, but refers to the extra nos character of God's Word. The vicarious principle which Bonhoeffer spoke of as early as Sanctorum Communio is an operative principle here.<sup>153</sup> But it is

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<sup>150</sup> Bethge, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>151</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, p. 161.

<sup>152</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 166. Bonhoeffer is clearly discussing pacifism in these words about suffering love. However, we are pointing to the larger theological reality which underlies these thoughts and is the adumbrating context in which his pacifism, at that time, must be understood.

<sup>153</sup> "Jesus offers his disciples a simple rule of thumb which will enable even the least sophisticated of them to tell whether his intercourse with others is on the right lines or not. All he need do is to say 'I' instead of 'Thou,' and put himself in the other man's place . . . the disciple will look upon other men

not enough to point to the social character of Bonhoeffer's understanding of power as the "power of weakness." The German pastor is suggesting a theological understanding of power as a conquering which is hidden in selfless love and action. God's rule and authority in the church, among disciples, takes paradigmatic form in the suffering love which occurred at the cross. Thus, Bonhoeffer makes militant christological claims based on the hidden definition of power which he understands to be operative at the heart of the cross. Such reveals the dialectical terms which unfold in his theologia crucis.

In conclusion, the Cost of Discipleship, which eventually caused Bonhoeffer's thought to become well known both inside and outside of Germany, demonstrates how ideas from as early as 1932 took shape to find their eventual expression in published form by 1937. In this way, the continuous nature of Bonhoeffer's theology is apparent, even though a significant portion of the force of his thought was formulated in relation to the church struggle going on at that time.

In plotting the progression of the way Bonhoeffer formulated his theological thought in terms of divine power and weakness from his early work to his late prison theology, The Cost of Discipleship clearly demonstrates the centrality of the theologia crucis during his middle period. In his early period a certain ambiguity with the notion of divine power and weakness was reflected in his life and thought. Then came the change in 1932. His Christology lectures reflected a much more consistent paradigm, holding up Luther's kenotic christological model as a critical, instructive paradigm for Germany at that time.

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as forgiven sinners who owe their lives to the love of God." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 209.

In The Cost of Discipleship, Bonhoeffer incorporates explicit statements on the hiddenness of God in terms of power and weakness--particularly with the notion of the weak Word--moving closer to resolving such terms in a full-blown manner, as he does in the letters from prison. During this middle period in his life, God's power and weakness in the world, as a motif, receives specific meaning from the theologia crucis. Divine power incorporates rejection into its definition--the weak Word is vulnerable in the world. Such a characteristic reflects the same kind of weakness Christ suffered on the cross--rejection by humanity.

At the same time, the weakness of the Word is a weakness which conceals. Its "power" does not reside in a programmatic message that can be guaranteed success, popularity or appeal among others. Its power is actually void of content for Bonhoeffer because the power is the relationship persons have through Jesus Christ and his death on the cross pro nobis. It is a social understanding of divine power characterized by a relationship of mutual self-giving: God giving himself freely for others in the Incarnate one on the cross; Jesus Christ experiencing suffering, rejection, and death for the sake of others; Christians giving of themselves freely with an attitude "outward" toward others because of the presence of Christ among them.

This is the social definition of divine power he came to articulate more and more, but it might be missed if his paradoxical use of language, particularly with reference to divine power and weakness, is overlooked. Power, as a motif, cannot be separated from weakness, for when they are both examined from the perspective of the cross, not only do they inform each other's



meaning, they reveal the "re-evaluation of values" which is implicit in such a meaning. As such, Bonhoeffer comes to understand and use this concept dialectically. Paradox suggests an ultimate contradiction residing between two motifs, for example, the Chalcedonian Definition. But Bonhoeffer comes to redefine divine power and weakness rather than leave them as mysterious concepts ultimately inexpressible. Bonhoeffer did not intend a programmatic definition or redefinition of power or weakness per se. It is, however, a result of the way he approached life and the theological enterprise as both came to be conditioned more and more by Luther's kind of theology--the theology of the cross. By looking to his late theology, we see how the paradigmatic terms of divine power and weakness received their most mature, full expression there, ultimately finding resolution in his full-blown theology of the cross.

## VI. Letters and Papers from Prison (1943-45)

### A. God's Providence in a Situation of Human Powerlessness

One of the aspects of a theology of the cross is that God is particularly known through suffering. This means that the Christian also experiences the cross of Christ in a profound, concrete way. This was the case for Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Until now, we have shown how the theologia crucis increasingly began to take shape in Bonhoeffer's life and theology in terms of power and weakness. Further, we have argued that a dialectic characterized these terms, increasingly according to Luther's theological paradigm. Now, as never before, Bonhoeffer's personal life reflected this paradigm.

For two years, Bonhoeffer knew the confined and isolated existence of the jail cell. Arrested on April 5, 1943 he was placed in Tegel prison in Berlin. During his two years of confinement he was moved to different incarceration units in Germany. From the Gestapo cellars in the Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse to Buchenwald concentration camp; from there to Regensburg to his eventual place of death at Flossenbürg. Under summary court martial, he was executed by hanging on April 9, 1945. These two years were the only time in his life that Bonhoeffer had all vestiges of power and influence taken from him. He came to know the meaning of powerlessness and weakness in proportions that only added a new dimension of credibility and sharpness to his previous theological thought.<sup>154</sup>

As Bonhoeffer came to know first hand what personal suffering meant, he incorporated themes relating God's power to his present situation of powerlessness in a profound way. At this time in his life the German pastor was forced to "wait." It became a "dominant feature of [the] present condition."<sup>155</sup> During this time of waiting, Bonhoeffer spoke of divine power with his numerous references to God's providence. At several points during his prison experience he spoke of a new feeling of "being in God's hands" while his own hands, for all intent purposes, were effectively tied and rendered useless:

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<sup>154</sup> Bethge mentions the significance of Kristallnacht in November 1938 as a turning point for Bonhoeffer in which he decided action must be taken against Hitler, not just words. This decision, which manifest itself in an explicit way when Bonhoeffer returned from the U.S. in June 1939, showed the way in which he "reduced" his own power, fully aware of the consequences involved. See Appendix I, pp. 310-11, 318 to understand the way in which weakness found powerful expression in Bonhoeffer's own life.

<sup>155</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 7 August 1943, p. 89.

As long as we ourselves are trying to help shape someone else's destiny, we are never quite free of the question whether what we're doing is really for the other person's benefit--at least in any matter of great importance. But when all possibility of co-operating in anything is suddenly cut off, then behind any anxiety about him there is the consciousness that his life has now been placed wholly in better and stronger hands. For you, and for us, the greatest task during the coming weeks, and perhaps months, may be to entrust each other to those hands.<sup>156</sup>

The imagery of being, ultimately, in God's hands and not human ones, brought Bonhoeffer comfort and strength.<sup>157</sup> Rather than giving in to a morbid fatalism,<sup>158</sup> he firmly believed in a boundary between resistance and submission in the face of fate and using prudent discretion in exercising both.<sup>159</sup> Eschatology went hand in hand with God's providence: only God can somehow

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<sup>156</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 23 January 1944, pp. 190-91.

<sup>157</sup> See Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 22 December 1943, p. 174; 24 December 1943, p. 177.

<sup>158</sup> "Of course, not everything that happens is simply 'God's will'; yet in the last resort nothing happens 'without God's will' (Matthew 10:29), i.e. through every event, however untoward, there is access to God." Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 18 December 1943, p. 167.

<sup>159</sup> "I think we must rise to the great demands that are made on us personally, and yet at the same time fulfil the commonplace and necessary tasks of daily life. We must confront fate . . . as resolutely as we submit to it at the right time. One can speak of 'guidance' only on the other side of that twofold process, with God meeting us no longer as 'Thou', but also 'disguised' in the 'It'; so in the last resort my question is how we are to find the 'Thou' in this 'It' (i.e. fate), or, in other words, how does 'fate' really become 'guidance'? It's therefore impossible to define the boundary between resistance and submission on abstract principles; but both of them must exist, and both must be practised. Faith demands this elasticity of behavior. Only so can we stand our ground in each situation as it arises, and turn it to gain." Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 21 February 1944, pp. 217-18.

bring good out of evil, providing certain hope amidst what appears meaningless chaos.<sup>160</sup>

## B. The Place and Meaning of Suffering in the Christian Life

Bonhoeffer wrote a letter on 21 July 1944, the day after von Stauffenberg's attempt on Hitler's life failed, knowing his destiny was most likely sealed at that point. Having already talked about the "elasticity" faith requires in a letter five months earlier, he went on to draw the lines of such faith more clearly in words which have since become renowned:

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself . . . . By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God in the world--watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf. Jer. 45!). How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind?<sup>161</sup>

Sharing in God's sufferings in the world--one could not be closer to a cross-centered way of thinking than Bonhoeffer here. Bonhoeffer came to recognize the place of suffering in the Christian life in such a way that this theme indelibly marks the pages of his prison letters. He believed in living life to the full, which necessarily meant embracing its pain and sorrows

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<sup>160</sup> See Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 11, Letter of 9 March 1944, pp. 231-32.

<sup>161</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 21 July 1944, pp. 369-70.

honestly.<sup>162</sup> He felt sharing someone's distress much more valuable than trying to explain it.<sup>163</sup>

Bonhoeffer saw a danger in talking about suffering so explicitly. For him, suffering as an abstract principle is wrong:

Now, is it right to set the Old Testament blessing against the cross? That is what Kierkegaard did. That makes the cross, or at least suffering, an abstract principle; and that is just what gives rise to an unhealthy methodism, which deprives suffering of its element of contingency as a divine ordinance . . . To turn to a different point: not only action, but also suffering is a way to freedom. In suffering, the deliverance consists in our being allowed to put the matter out of our own hands into God's hands. In this sense death is the crowning of human freedom. Whether the human deed is a matter of faith or not depends on whether we understand our suffering as an extension of our action and a completion of freedom. I think that is very important and comforting.<sup>164</sup>

Bonhoeffer was able to talk about suffering and deliverance at the same time, having found a new dimension to this aspect of the cross. The comfort it brought him could not have been better expressed than in his memorable poem "Stations on the Way to Freedom." There he describes suffering as one of the inevitable stops on the journey to ultimate freedom in Christ.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> See Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 23 January 1944, p. 191, Letter of 18 December 1943, pp. 167-68; Letter of 24 December 1943, pp. 176-77.

<sup>163</sup> See Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 1 February 1944, p. 203.

<sup>164</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 28 July 1944, pp. 374-75. (Emphasis added).

<sup>165</sup> "A change has come indeed. Your hands, so strong and active, are bound; in helplessness now you see your action is ended; you sigh in relief, your cause committing to stronger hands; so now you may rest contented. Only for one blissful moment could you draw near to touch freedom; then, that it might be perfected in glory, you gave it to God." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 371. It is worth noting the imagery of the strength of God's

Lest one think Bonhoeffer waxed poetic about suffering, he maintained until his death quite a strong, sometimes humorously unremitting view on the topic. His vivid recounting of an experience with a fellow prisoner demonstrates this unambiguous attitude.<sup>166</sup> In keeping with his intolerance for others' self-described suffering, he refused to characterize his own situation in these terms:

When people suggest in their letters . . . that I'm suffering here, I reject the thought. It seems to me a profanation. These things mustn't be dramatized. I doubt very much whether I'm 'suffering' any more than you, or most people, are suffering today. Of course, a great deal here is horrible, but where isn't it? Perhaps we've made too much of this question of suffering, and been too solemn about it . . . . I believe, for instance, that physical sufferings, actual pain and so on, are certainly to be classed as 'suffering.' We so like to stress spiritual suffering; and yet that is just what Christ is supposed to have taken from us, and I can find nothing about it in the New Testament, or in the acts of the early martyrs. After

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hands taking over that of human hands in suffering--a beautiful way Bonhoeffer spoke poetically of God's power in the midst of human weakness.

<sup>166</sup> "My present companion, whom I have mentioned several times in my letters, gets more and more pitiable. He has two colleagues here, one of whom spends the whole day moaning, and the other literally messes his trousers whenever the alert goes, and last night even when the first warning was sounded! When he told me about it yesterday--still moaning--I laughed outright and told him off, whereupon he would have me know that one mustn't laugh at anyone in distress or condemn him. I felt that that was really going too far, and I told him in no uncertain terms what I thought of people who can be very hard on others and talk big about a dangerous life and so on, and then collapse under the slightest test of endurance. I told him it was a downright disgrace, that I had no sympathy at all with anyone like that, that I would throw any such specimens out of the party for making it look ridiculous, and so on. He was very surprised, and I dare say he thinks me a very doubtful Christian . . . . There are 17 and 18-year-olds here in much more dangerous places during the raids who behave splendidly, while these . . . go round whimpering . . . . [T]here is a kind of weakness that Christianity does not hold with, but which people insist on claiming as Christian, and then sling mud at. So we must take care that the contours do not get blurred." Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, Letter of 2 February 1944, pp. 204-05 (Emphasis added).



all, whether 'the church suffers' is not at all the same as whether one of its servants has to put up with this or that. I think we need a good deal of correction on this point; indeed, I must admit candidly that I sometimes feel almost ashamed of how often we've talked about our own sufferings. No, suffering must be something quite different, and have a quite different dimension, from what I've so far experienced.<sup>167</sup>

It would be wrong for us to formulate a normative concept of suffering for the Christian life in general based on Bonhoeffer's views, not only because the German pastor himself discouraged general notions on the topic as "abstract," but because he was writing with particular, concrete examples of suffering in mind--for example, Jews being arrested, placed in camps, and killed. However, he does offer a basic guideline by which we may understand the critical dimensions of suffering according to Christ's cross. The first quote shows his thoughts about the meaning of God's suffering, the second describes that of the Christian:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering . . . . Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the deus ex machina. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. . . .<sup>168</sup>

To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself . . . on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man--not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the

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<sup>167</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 9 March 1944, pp. 231-32.

<sup>168</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 16 July 1944, pp. 360-61.

Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is metanoia: not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event. . . .<sup>169</sup>

These words capture in crystallized expression an essential aspect of Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis: what suffering under the cross of Jesus Christ looks like in the world. Thus, Bonhoeffer offered a fresh interpretation of this aspect of Luther's cross-centered theology by laying out the contours of God's suffering in the world in contemporary terms.

In his letter of 18 July 1944 Bonhoeffer went on to describe a variety of forms the messianic sufferings of God in Jesus Christ take in the New Testament.<sup>170</sup> He then followed up with the question, "But what does this life look like, this participation in the powerlessness of God in the world?" Bonhoeffer spoke of God's sufferings in the world repeatedly in the terms which marked his theology from early on--in terms of weakness. But these terms have taken on an added meaning--they are the signposts of God's presence in the world, who God is for us today. As we shall see, Bonhoeffer held that this is where God's very strength and omnipotence are to be found. This is Luther's theology of the cross brought to new heights, finding dynamic and provocative expression.

God's strength and weakness, power and powerlessness are the terms in Letters and Papers from Prison which release Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross into their full-blown expression. This Lutheran strand of thinking is the bedrock upon which

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<sup>169</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 18 July 1944, pp. 361-62.

<sup>170</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 18 July 1944, p. 362.

concomitant statements about the world-come-of-age and human autonomy are to be understood.<sup>171</sup> We have seen how Bonhoeffer understood strength and weakness together in a dialectical fashion. Doing so here again, yet as never before, he resolves this paradigm in terms of God's power and weakness, informed by the cross. A re-evaluation of values results. Bonhoeffer goes beyond Luther in this way. Not only does he point to the paradox involved in God's hidden power at the cross, he follows up by pointing to the dialectical contours of the new definition which is yielded up as a result of the transformation. This is just one way Bonhoeffer remains relevant for theology today.

### C. Winning Power and Space in the World by Weakness

As Luther's theology of the cross describes God in terms of hiddenness, Bonhoeffer follows in the same tradition by saying God is not as we imagine.<sup>172</sup> What may be surprising is the extent to which he discusses God's hiddenness in terms of weakness and powerlessness, and the way omnipotence figures into the theological equation:

He [God] is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> As we shall demonstrate in Chapter Two.

<sup>172</sup> "The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with what God, as we imagine him, could do and ought to do." Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, Letter of 21 August 1944, p. 391.

<sup>173</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, Letter of 16 July 1944, pp. 360-61.

And further,

Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world . . . [h]is [Christ's] 'being there for others' is the experience of transcendence. It is only this 'being there for others', maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.<sup>174</sup>

It is worth noting that Bonhoeffer does not reject the notion of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Rather, he asserts the right basis for a belief in God's all-pervasive attributes--in terms of Christ's "being there for others." The vicarious principle, which has been present in the German pastor's theology from early on, takes on added significance.<sup>175</sup> It is the theological cornerstone for understanding God's true power in the world.

With reference once again to the letter of 16 July 1944, we see Bonhoeffer's understanding of God reach its clearest expression in his discussion of humanity's coming-of-age.<sup>176</sup> The

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<sup>174</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 381.

<sup>175</sup> The vicarious principle of action takes its' cue, of course, from Jesus Christ, who Bonhoeffer described as "the Man for others." Indeed, this christological identification stayed with Bonhoeffer throughout his life. As G.B. Kelly pointed out, "This distinctively Bonhoefferian title does, in fact, sum up the various aspects which form, almost mosaic-like, the figure of Jesus Christ which emerges from Bonhoeffer's theology. Several Christological themes are interwoven here. If Bonhoeffer can describe Christ as "the man for others" (der Mensch für Andere), it is because his basic notion of God-in-Christ is of one who exists pro me, as man's representative (Stellvertreter) and in the most total act of his self-donation, the humiliation of the cross. Kelly, "Revelation in Christ: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," p. 66.

<sup>176</sup> The world-come-of-age concept will be treated more fully in chapter two. However, it is appropriate at this time to acknowledge Bonhoeffer's agreement with Feuerbach that God as a working hypothesis had been surmounted and eschewed. He notes

quotation is lengthy, however, unless it is examined as it appears below, it is possible to miss the crucial theological link Bonhoeffer makes between God's power and weakness in the world and what it means. That he speaks of God paradigmatically in such terms is striking:

And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world etsi deus non daretur ['even if there were no God']. And this is just what we do recognize--before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us, and helps us. Matthew 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

. . . . Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the deus ex machina. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting-point for our 'secular interpretation'.<sup>177</sup>

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that philosophers from Descartes (deism) to Spinoza (pantheism) have all indicated the movement of modern philosophy, in its various representations, towards the notion of human and worldly autonomy. As a result of reading about nineteenth century Germany, he decided that a new historical epoch was in the making. The deus ex machina would be discarded while human autonomy and responsibility would take on new status. He tried to express this with the concept of a world-come-of-age. Further, with his belief in the entrance of this new secularization came the corresponding notion that the religious conscience is not a God-shaped void in humans. It is a construct of history and society.

<sup>177</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 16 July 1944, pp. 360-61.

Bonhoeffer's use of paradoxical language is striking throughout this passage. The Scottish theologian Ronald Gregor Smith never tired of stressing the dialectic involved in Bonhoeffer's description of God in this way. In order to combat Bonhoeffer's would-be interpreters from reducing the tension of the paradox, Smith emphasized the paradoxical aspects of Bonhoeffer's statements.<sup>178</sup>

Power and weakness mark Bonhoeffer's discussion of who God is in a way that is paradigmatic.<sup>179</sup> He clearly is pitting two notions of God against each other here. He speaks of a false God in terms of religiosity<sup>180</sup> who is characterized by power. He also refers to the 'God of the Bible,' characterized by powerlessness, suffering, and weakness. Not only are two very

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<sup>178</sup> He said, "It is this hidden presence, this presence in absence and absence in presence, which is the reality of Christ's being. It is not possible to weaken the tension, or to simplify the consequent dialectic, by suggesting . . . that the God 'without' whom we live 'before God and with God' is merely the false God, the God who has been turned into a principle and made an object of thought and of religious aspirations. On the contrary, it is the one God before whom and with whom we live who is at the same time the God we are without." Ronald Gregor Smith, ed., World Come of Age. A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (London: Collins, 1967), p. 19. Cf. Clements, op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>179</sup> While Larry Rasmussen suggests that Bonhoeffer came to the subject of power in the last year of his life (Dietrich Bonhoeffer--His Significance for North Americans, p. 112) he seems to be referring specifically to the concept of state power. This is certainly true as a result of his involvement with the political conspirators. However, the power of the state and the citizen's responsibility represents an important development in Bonhoeffer's long quest to understand and articulate divine and human power. Bonhoeffer had a great deal to say about power at the most basic social level--between God and person, and between one person and another. This basic sociality underlies his later thoughts and actions having to do with concepts of responsibility and power in relation to the state in Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison.

<sup>180</sup> Barth's critique of religion had a lasting effect on Bonhoeffer as is evidenced here, as elsewhere, in Letters and Papers from Prison.



different notions of God delimited here, but two very opposing notions of potency and impotence implicated in such images.

At first glance, it would seem that 'power' is a negative word in Bonhoeffer's theological dictionary when used to describe God in the world, whereas 'powerlessness' is definitive. When one looks more closely to the way he employs these terms, it becomes clear that he is making use of paradoxical language. Bonhoeffer does not let his theological notion of God's power--powerlessness tread in unresolved paradox. This would mean the lack of an intelligible, concrete theological solution. Rather, at work in his description of the god of religion and the powerlessness of the God of the Bible is a redefinition of what powerful and powerless mean with reference to God.

This redefining of concepts is at the heart of the theology of the cross, for it is in the very nature of such a paradigm to describe God as hidden rather than omnipotent. Bonhoeffer maintains the paradox involved with Luther's notion of God's power being hidden in the weakness of the cross. However, he is not content to leave such terms there. He moves on for expression of the "re-evaluation of values" that occurs in this specific instance. He moves in search of the hidden concrete meaning of God's presence as these terms are dictated by the cross. A dialectic then, not paradox, comes to characterize God's presence in the world, and he demonstrates the concrete nature of this transformed concept by way of a christological guideline.

The key to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's dialectical understanding of God is expressed most concisely and consistently in his christological notion of "being there for others." The cross reveals the nature of God's simultaneous power and powerlessness

in the world. On the one hand, the imago Dei suggests nothing more than the crucified figure of Christ, powerless in the hands of humanity, suffering a cruel death for the sake of all. But such an image recasts the notion of God's power in terms of atonement, not omnipotence.

Hidden behind God's powerlessness on the cross, then, is the real meaning of divine power. The nature of this power is in serving and giving to the other. It is 'being there for others' as Bonhoeffer liked to say in his prison letters. We recall his words, "It is only this 'being there for others', maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence."<sup>181</sup> Divine omnipotence receives its meaning from the lowly figure of Christ on the cross, where the nature of divine power is in Christ's giving of himself for sinful humanity. Bonhoeffer follows in the tradition of Luther's theology of the cross by asserting divine power in incarnational and cross-centered terms. He draws from the event of God's atonement, rather than postulating omnipotence in more traditionally orthodox terms which emphasize God's unquestioned control of human affairs. With a theology of the cross, power is understood christologically and socially in terms of service.

Bonhoeffer was glad to see the advances of secularity into the modern age, largely because of its doing away with the notion of a deus ex machina. Abstract notions of God--such as the omnipotent One--could finally make way for concrete ones. The crucified Christ, who suffered and died on the cross, rejected by humanity then and now--this is the way God is present in the

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<sup>181</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., "Outline for a Book," p. 381.

world. Bonhoeffer could not have presented more contrasting images of God to an increasingly autonomous Western society.

In his christology lectures of 1933 he did not hold up the son of God as the locus for understanding who God is, he pointed to the humiliated Son of God.<sup>182</sup> It was a thoroughly kenotic Christology. Hence, Luther's approach to theology is bound up with the notion of an "emptying" of divine power and authority as is demonstrated in the Suffering Servant. Similarly here, Bonhoeffer rejects the notion of an all-powerful God whose rule depends upon human weakness, guilt and dependency. This is why Feuerbach and Nietzsche were his allies on this point.<sup>183</sup> He rejected the idea of God as it tends to prevail in traditional terms, like omnipotence, because for such an idea to take hold presumes an exploitation of human weakness and dependency. It requires a "sickness of soul" for which God is the cure.

Bonhoeffer unambiguously held up the suffering, rejected Christ on the cross as the locus of God's presence among humanity in the twentieth century. However, in doing so, he pointed to the hidden nature of God's power in the midst of a seemingly pathetic display of divine revelation in the world. Bonhoeffer went beyond the paradox of traditional Lutheran thought, pointing out a divine power of an entirely different order.

In rejecting the deus ex machina, Bonhoeffer was rejecting the notion of divine power which exploited human weakness. Further, God's power in terms of omnipotence--the precise terms

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<sup>182</sup> "If Jesus Christ is to be described as God, then we may not speak of this divine essence, of his omnipotence and his omniscience, but we must speak of this weak man among sinners, of his cradle and his cross. When we consider the Godhead of Jesus, then above all we must speak of his weakness. Bonhoeffer, Christology, p. 108.

<sup>183</sup> Feuerbach and Nietzsche are discussed in Chapter Two.

Bonhoeffer rejected--assumes a dominating kind of rule; one which not only connotes a strict hierarchy with God above the world and absolute control of human affairs, but one which suggests power as a possession which God owns, distributes and wields according to his will regardless of those upon whom such power is to effect.

Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, holds up the suffering Christ of the cross as the locus of divine power--suggesting thereby an entirely new paradigm through which to view God's concealed power. For him, Christ's "omnipotence" or power is grounded in a social reality, not a reified one. Power is not a divine essence or "thing" which God possesses. Divine power is manifest in His Son's giving of himself in the most profound relationship for others, having taken upon himself all human sin. The profound intimacy of relationship in such a concept is striking, as against that of an omnipotent God.

That Christ followed the path of the cross, suffered there and died in the place of others offering forgiveness is the full demonstration of God's power revealed in the world. Such an understanding of divine revelation remains concealed and hidden to many because it goes against common definitions of what God's power should look like according to our expectations. This is the way Bonhoeffer goes beyond Luther in his theology of the cross. He takes up the hiddenness of God's power and looks at what that power means in the light of the cross for the world today.

The christological notion of 'being there for others' is the theological guideline Bonhoeffer offers a world which has gradually come to understand itself increasingly in terms of power, self-determination, and autonomy. As such, it stands as

a provocative, permanent critique against other definitions of power. Holding up divine power as a fundamentally social, relational concept which revolves around the motif of vicarious living and acting with and for others, Bonhoeffer suggested this as a model for the church's form of power in the world. In his "Outline for a Book," in words which parallel the words he had just written about God's power in the world as 'being there for others,' he said:

The church is the church only when it exists for others . . . The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. . . .<sup>184</sup>

Serving, rather than dominating, stands at the heart of this christological notion of divine power. In this way, Bonhoeffer concretely discusses a crucial parameter of what the cross of Jesus Christ looks like in the world as well as that of the Christian. Further, he lays out a critical theological guideline by which divine power as well as human power are to be weighed and measured.

### Conclusions

Eberhard Bethge said Bonhoeffer's whole life was a struggle to come to terms with his own power over others. We have seen the same kind of struggle in his theology. His early academic theology revealed an ambiguity with regard to the way God is

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<sup>184</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, "Outline for a Book," pp. 382-83.

present in the world. While weakness as an explicit ecclesiological and implicit christological theme was brought out as early as Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer still had not come to terms with his titanic notion of God. Yet his relentless desire to determine the concrete nature of God's revelation in the world, particularly in Lutheran terms like the existential coram Deo motif and the christological 'pro nobis' theme, all portend the sociality which undergirded his developing theological enterprise.

Then came the change in 1932 when Christianity became real to him, and theology became more than an academic enterprise. His tendency toward ambition and dominating others was salved in a fundamental way, and this was reflected in his theology. The Christology lectures revealed a thoroughly Lutheran kenotic christology which held up the scandal of Christ's passion as the definitive example of God's hidden power in Christ. From 1933 on, we noted Bonhoeffer's increasingly consistent description of God and God's presence in the world in terms of power and weakness. His crucial decision in June 1939, to return to Germany and the fate awaiting him there signals the way he personally traded certain security and influence in America, using his power instead in sacrificial service for those suffering in his homeland. In this way, we saw how he ultimately resolved the paradox between power and weakness dialectically in his own life and theology according to Luther's theologia crucis.

When one accepts the thesis that Bonhoeffer approached his life and the theological enterprise in this way, important questions that linger around certain aspects of his theology are resolved. The commanding figure of Christ in The Cost of Discipleship no longer is seen as a digression between his early



and late work--the nature of such authority gaining its meaning from the cross.<sup>185</sup>

We understand Bonhoeffer's later statements about human autonomy, strength, and power dialectically, in terms of his statements about God's weakness in the world. He had said the God of the Bible who wins power and space in the world by his weakness would be the starting point for his non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts.<sup>186</sup> In this way, we see how the categories of power and weakness run throughout his theology in a consistent, provocative manner, yielding new dimensions to well-known categories of thought. As Bethge has noted, there is an astonishingly broad continuity in Bonhoeffer between the Berlin beginnings and the Tegel period. "Bonhoeffer had preserved this Christology for fifteen years, continually making it more profound, in order to ground the present power of Christ even more clearly in the weakness of the human sufferings of Jesus."<sup>187</sup>

Bonhoeffer's understanding of God stands in the sharpest contrast to traditional notions of God's omnipotence specifically because of the terms of power traditionally assigned to God. Bonhoeffer mentioned several times his belief that the omnipotent God was an abstract concept, falsely carried over from past periods of history. He praised the work of Feuerbach in so far as it did away with a childish working hypothesis and made way

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<sup>185</sup> Of course, not to mention the fact that Bonhoeffer was contrasting the ultimate nature of Christ's authority in the church against that of Hitler.

<sup>186</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July, 1944, p. 361.

<sup>187</sup> Bethge, op. cit., p. 793 (Emphasis added).

for intellectual freedom. "God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion (Feuerbach!)"<sup>188</sup>

Anxious souls will ask what room there is left for God now; and as they know of no answer to the question, they condemn the whole development that has brought them to such straits . . . I wrote to you before about the various emergency exits that have been contrived; . . . There is no such way--at any rate not if it means deliberately abandoning our mental integrity; the only way is that of Matt. 18.3, i.e., through repentance, through ultimate honesty . . . Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the deus ex machina. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering . . . To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness.<sup>189</sup>

Thus, Bonhoeffer hailed a new period in history, but this during the midst of war in Germany in the mid-forties, at a time when hope was all but quashed for the Germans. He held up an understanding of God which stemmed from the notion of God's weakness and powerlessness in the world. It was a hidden God, but one whose power was manifest in such weakness. It was a different kind of power altogether from what anyone could imagine. Because Bonhoeffer drew out the implications of the living God who is hidden in weakness according to the cross and in terms of atonement, theology as a discipline has been left

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<sup>188</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July 1944, p. 360.

<sup>189</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 360-61 (Emphasis added).

with a critical christological guideline against which theological claims may be measured.

Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world . . . [t]he Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering . . . [t]o that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age . . . opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting-point for our 'secular interpretation'.

Bonhoeffer, Letter of 16 July, 1944,  
Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 361.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HUMAN AUTONOMY AND THE THEOLOGIA CRUCIS: TOWARD A DIALECTICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN POWER

#### Introduction

As the theologia crucis ultimately provides the ground for Bonhoeffer's understanding of God, the same is true for his anthropology. Whereas Chapter One documented the reversal of terms and redefinition involved in Bonhoeffer's concept of God in terms of power and weakness, Chapter Two does so again here, with respect to his theological anthropology and the meaning assigned to human power. In accordance with the method and terms of Luther's theology of the cross, Bonhoeffer demonstrates the way human power, or 'autonomy,' is understood in relation to God's hidden power, or weakness. The dialectical relationship between these terms shines forth clearly in the late theology, particularly in his Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison.

This chapter examines the christological and anthropological terms of power that surface in Bonhoeffer's late works of Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison (1940-1945). First, we examine the positive meaning he assigns to human power in the Ethics, particularly with his concepts of reality and responsibility. By pointing out how the cross informs such meaning, Bonhoeffer identifies the dangers inherent within an increasingly autonomous, powerful humanity. In this way, we show how Bonhoeffer discusses the positive and negative terms of an autonomous humanity in terms of power.

Then, we look to the Letters and Papers from Prison where Bonhoeffer spoke the most clearly in terms of a theology of the cross. With his critique of religion came an affirmation of the modern period in history in which humanity becomes increasingly autonomous, making less recourse to "God" in questions of importance.<sup>1</sup> By demonstrating how the terms of his religious critique are bound up in the concept of power, we see more clearly how notions like a "world come of age" and a "non-religious interpretation of theological concepts" gain their meaning accordingly. Divine and human power are discussed exclusively in christological terms--the vicarious principle of "being there for others." This represents the pinnacle of Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross--where language describing God and humanity in terms of power parallel one another, taking shape according to the cross. We turn now, however, to see how Bonhoeffer's Ethics is conditioned by two motifs in particular--conformation and command--and the way in which power and weakness figure into his schema, this time in his conservative social construct "superiority and inferiority."

The Ethics was to be Bonhoeffer's magnum opus, and he expressed from prison that he felt it was the only thing left for him to finish.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this chapter, then, is to highlight two ethical motifs--conformation and command--in the Ethics which are determinative for some key ethical concepts (responsibility, deputyship, obedience, freedom); concomitantly,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 8 June 1944, pp. 325-29.

<sup>2</sup> "I sometimes feel as if my life were more or less over, and as if all I had to do now were to finish my Ethics." Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 15 December 1943, p. 163.



we shall then demonstrate how such ethical terms inform key anthropological terms (world come of age, non-religious interpretation of theological concepts) in the Letters and Papers from Prison. In this way, we will ultimately show that Bonhoeffer not only had a great deal to say about human power in his late theology, but how such power gains its meaning exclusively in christological terms, according to the theologia crucis. Before we begin our investigation into his two later works, a brief word regarding the Ethics is necessary, due largely to the unfinished nature of the project.

Six years ago in 1988, Bonhoeffer scholars focused attention on the Ethics at the Fifth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference in Amsterdam. One very important result of the conference was a panel discussion on "New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics." In this chapter we shall be building on the findings of two scholars whose research was presented at this conference. First, Clifford Green's proposed chronological reordering of the ethics fragments into five phases serves as the organizational paradigm for our anthropological analysis.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, in his

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<sup>3</sup> Rather than maintain four different ethical approaches and their corresponding chronological order as Eberhard Bethge has in previous editions, Green proposed five different phases that involve a reorganization of concepts in the new Ethics volume of the critical edition of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke. See Appendix II for the differences between the two sequences.

It is important to note that whereas Bethge organized Bonhoeffer's Ethics into four different ethical "approaches" ('Ansatz'), Green proposed that the manuscripts be arranged in three 'blocks.' He said, "By choosing the term 'block' I meant to indicate 'a chapter or group of chapters which Bonhoeffer intended to belong together in developing a set of ethical ideas.' Hence, 'block' for me was 'a more neutral word which does not imply that a particular block is necessarily a 'new approach' or that it is governed by a particular theological theme which is different from other blocks; but nor does it exclude that possibility." Clifford Green, "Textual Research for the New Edition of Bonhoeffer's Ethics" Panel Discussion, in Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers, Guy Carter, René van Eyden, Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten, Jurjen Wiersma, eds.

partial summary of the chapter "A Question of Method," Larry Rasmussen contends that there are two different methodological motifs explicitly discussed in the Ethics: "conformation" and "command."<sup>4</sup> By focusing on the christological basis of these methodological motifs, i.e., the commanding Christ and the crucified Christ, according to whose shape we conform, Chapter Two emphasizes the christological basis of these two ethical concepts, not their status as ethical categories per se.

The discussion on his unfinished Ethics begins with his concept of reality, examining how conformation plays a central role there and is further clarified by a controlling motif during his second phase: the penultimate and the ultimate. Finally, in his last period, the fifth phase, consideration is given to Bonhoeffer's concept of the commanding Christ who rules by mandate and command. With the discovery in 1982 of correspondence between Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, we now know that Bonhoeffer, in May 1942, read the section of Barth's Church Dogmatics (II/2), "The Command of God." This means that the work represented during the fifth phase, in which he deals with the "The Ethical and the Christian as a Theme" and "The Concrete Command and the Divine Mandates,"<sup>5</sup> is heavily dependent on Bonhoeffer's reading of the galley-proofs of Church Dogmatics

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(Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), pp. 32, 33, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Rasmussen, 'A Question of Method,' in "New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics," Bonhoeffer's Ethics. Old Europe and New Frontiers, (Guy Carter, Réne van Eyden, Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten, and Jurjen Wiersma, eds.) (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), p. 43-44. See also Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer--His Significance for North Americans, op. cit., pp. 91-110.

<sup>5</sup> The period from the end of 1942 to 5 April 1943.

II/2, even though there is no mention of this either by Bonhoeffer, Barth or Bethge.<sup>6</sup>

In both periods of his writing, the first phase and the fifth phase, the two methodological themes Rasmussen identified are clearly apparent: conformation and command. While we examine both categories, we pause to take a closer look at the ethical theme of command, and the christological description of Christ as the one who issues the mandate or command. Such an analysis is necessary for the very important reason that Bonhoeffer, in various phases of writing Ethics, uses conservatively ordered relationships to describe his ethical notions. For example, in his last phase of writing, which gleans heavily from Barth and his "theology of the Word," Bonhoeffer describes God's commandment in terms of a defined order of superiority and inferiority. As we have seen throughout his theology, Bonhoeffer uses the poles of power and weakness to express his thought--this time, in Ethics in terms of superiority and inferiority. In the first phase, with his concept of reality, the mandates and a structured "order" are present in a significant way. At the same time, in both phases of his writing, he points to the crucified Christ as the one in whom all dominion rests and in whom all reality is bound. How does he reconcile these two seemingly contrary notions?

Rather than subordinate the theme of Christ as commander in the Ethics, as Larry Rasmussen does, and rather than fault Bonhoeffer for utilizing such conservatively ordered concepts as

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Rasmussen, 'A Question of Method,' in Bonhoeffer's Ethics. Old Europe and New Frontiers, p. 43.

inevitably oppressive and restrictively binding in his thought,<sup>7</sup> Chapter Two argues that Bonhoeffer has something surprising to say about such a socially ordered understanding. However, unless one examines his hierarchical notions closely and at length, it is easy to misconstrue Bonhoeffer's intention, and thus de-emphasize or prematurely negate such thinking before its meaning has been fully ascertained.

Finally, in the third and fourth phases of his writing the Ethics, in which he describes the structure and unity of responsibility, Bonhoeffer provides a clear and fresh understanding of the ordered relationship between God and world and between one person and another. Thus, despite the fragmentary nature of Bonhoeffer's project, the need to weigh each phase or section of his thought in relation to the others becomes paramount. Such careful examination of Bonhoeffer's various themes and how they impinge on one another demonstrates a continuity in his multi-faceted ethical project. The continuity we emphasize in this chapter is the way power and weakness surface once again in his late theology and how this informs his understanding of Christian anthropology.

#### I. The Ethics: Human Autonomy Defined in Relation to the Crucified and Commanding Christ

Nowhere does Bonhoeffer have more to say about the nature of human autonomy than in his Ethics and Letters and Papers from

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<sup>7</sup> As Stephen Plant does in his paper, "'A Suggestion of North German Patriarchalism': A Materialist Duologue with the Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," (Unpublished paper presented at the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference, New York, Union Theological Seminary on 8 August 1992). On file at Bonhoeffer Archives, Union Theological Seminary.

prison. Whereas he clearly spoke of a new time in human history characterized by autonomy, strength, and increased power with explicit motifs such as "world come of age" and a "non-religious interpretation of theological concepts" in the prison letters, such ideas were gaining expression at the time of his writing the Ethics (1940-43). This is evident time and time again: (1) in his discussion of the inheritance of the Western world and two kinds of godlessness--a hopeless godlessness and a godlessness full of promise--foretelling his notion of a religionless Christianity<sup>8</sup>; (2) with his clear definition of the difference between the natural and the creaturely, the "natural" implying an element of independence and self-development that parallels the notion of humanity's maturity and adulthood; and (3) in the concepts which go together to mark the structure of responsibility, i.e., freedom and deputyship.

It is well known that the Ethics is an unfinished attempt at a book<sup>9</sup>, containing within it several different ethical points of departure. The question arises, then, why examine more closely his christological terms in the Ethics? The answer is in the foundation upon which his Ethics is built:

The point of departure for Christian ethics is not the reality of one's own self, or the reality of the world; nor is it the reality of standards and values. It is the reality of God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. It is fair to begin by demanding assent to this proposition of anyone who wishes to concern himself with the problem of a Christian ethic.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 98-108.

<sup>9</sup> The day Bonhoeffer was placed under house arrest, 5 April 1943, drafts of the fifth phase were lying on his desk and were confiscated by the Gestapo.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 189-90.

In this first phase of writing, Bonhoeffer summarized the nature of his ethical approach in incarnational terms. Christian ethics is ultimately a christologically-based enterprise. Fundamental questions such as, "What is 'good' and 'evil' in the world?", and "How does one discern between them?" receive their answer in the living Jesus Christ who embraces all of reality.<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer was attempting to offer a unified understanding of God, doing away with traditional two sphere thinking in Christian ethics.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he proposes to hold God and the world together with his concept of reality. Accordingly, it is appropriate for us to briefly examine this christo-centric understanding of ethics before turning to Bonhoeffer's notion of human autonomy.

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<sup>11</sup> "The will of God, which became manifest and was fulfilled in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of reality. One can gain access to this whole, without being torn asunder by its manifold variety, only in faith in Jesus Christ, 'in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2.9 and 1.19), 'by whom all things are reconciled, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven' (Col. 1.20), and whose body, the Church, is 'the fulness of him that filleth all in all' (Eph. 1.23). Faith in this Jesus Christ is the sole fountain-head of all good." Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer identified this as a "colossal obstacle" which began after New Testament times, became dominant in the Middle Ages and again after the Reformation, prevailing in the field even in his time. With such thinking "the main underlying conception in ethical thought, and the one which consciously or unconsciously has determined its whole course, has been the conception of a juxtaposition and conflict of two spheres, the one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian, and the other worldly, profane, natural and un-Christian." The problem for him with such dualistic structures is that Christ becomes a "partial and provincial matter within the limits of reality. [Thus,] [i]t is assumed that there are realities which lie outside the reality that is in Christ." Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 196. Hence, the sizable undertaking of Bonhoeffer's ethical project as a whole and the profound significance of his unified concept of reality in particular.



A. An Ethic of Reality: Conformation to the Crucified Christ

For Bonhoeffer, ethics involves a concrete, all-encompassing christology at its base. It is concrete, not abstract in character, applying to all of humanity, not a portion of it.<sup>13</sup> Despite the universal nature of its claim, it does not aim at "developing a program for shaping or formation of the western world."<sup>14</sup> It is concerned with the way Christ takes form in the world, and Bonhoeffer discusses this in terms of reality:

The form of Christ is one and the same at all times and in all places. And the Church of Christ is also one and the same throughout all generations. And yet Christ is not a principle in accordance with which the whole world must be shaped. Christ is not the proclaimer of a system of what would be good today, here and at all times . . . [He] was not essentially a teacher and a legislator, but a man, a real man like ourselves. And it is not therefore His will that we should in our time be the adherents, exponents and advocates of a definite doctrine, but that we should be men, real men before God . . . For indeed it is not written that God became an idea, a principle, a programme, a universally valid proposition or a law, but that God became man. This means that though the form of Christ certainly is and remains one and the same, yet it is willing to take form in the real man, that is to say, in quite different guises . . . What Christ does is precisely to give effect to reality. He affirms reality. And indeed He is Himself the real man and consequently the foundation of all human reality. And so formation in conformity with Christ has this double implication. The form of Christ remains one and the same, not as a general idea but in its own unique character as the incarnate, crucified and risen God. And precisely for the sake of Christ's form the form of the real man is preserved, and in this way the real man receives the form of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 85-86..

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 84-85.

The christological foundation for this ethical approach is abundantly clear.

This unified concept of reality, which gains its meaning in Jesus Christ, is not self-evident. Just at the point where Bonhoeffer discusses the knowledge of reality, how it is obtained, and how easily it can be misperceived, christology is again the key. He points to the achievements and attitudes of a noble humanity--reason, moral fanaticism, conscience, duty, free responsibility and silent virtue--and demonstrates how each of these is unable to honestly and consistently perceive the nature of reality.<sup>16</sup> With a preconceived program of interpretation operating in one's ethical system, reality then becomes something against which theory may be applied and judged. Bonhoeffer said:

It is not by astuteness, by knowing the tricks, but only by simple steadfastness in the truth of God, by training the eye upon this truth until it is simple and wise, that there comes the experience and the knowledge of the ethical reality.

Thus, Bonhoeffer points to a depth, a profundity in the nature of reality with which an ethical system ultimately cannot reckon. Without "pouring scorn" on the noble achievements of earlier generations in their attempts to determine the knowledge of ethical reality, Bonhoeffer attempts to "replace rusty swords with new ones."<sup>17</sup>

He points away from ethical principles as a guide to reality, and instead toward "simplicity and wisdom"--toward the

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, pp. 65-68.

<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 68.

person of Jesus Christ--to make reality clear and perceptible. Writing in 1940, at a time when "all concepts [were] being confused, distorted and turned upside-down"<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer believed his generation was beset and oppressed by a "superabounding reality of concrete ethical problems," while the moral theorists were blinded and deceived by evil appearing in the form of light.<sup>19</sup>

Bonhoeffer proposed, then, a concept, an ethic of reality which is void of programmatic content, gaining expression and meaning in social terms--in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> Reality is not only christologically determined, it is profound in nature, so much so that it requires both "simplicity" and "wisdom" to perceive it:

To be simple is to fix one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted and turned upside-down. . . . Not fettered by principles, but bound by love for God, he has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision . . . It is precisely because he looks only to God, without any sidelong glance at the world, that he is able to look at the reality of the world freely and without prejudice. And that is how simplicity becomes wisdom. The wise man is the one who sees reality as it is, and who sees into the depth of things. That is why only that man is wise who sees reality in God. To understand reality is not the same as to know about outward events. It is to perceive the essential nature of things.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> Such a specifically christological motif echoes the way he described Jesus' call to discipleship in The Cost of Discipleship, p. 62. Cf. René de Visme Williamson, Politics and Protestant Theology. An Interpretation of Tillich, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Brunner, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 68-69. (Emphasis added).

By pointing to "simplicity" and "wisdom," Bonhoeffer points to the hidden nature of reality. Reality, ethically speaking, is not self-evident. It can easily be misperceived and misconstrued, and may only be understood by looking to God's revelation in Christ in order to correctly perceive it. Thus, according to Bonhoeffer's portrayal of it in this first phase of his Ethics, reality is held together christologically, and is hidden in nature.

One last factor must be considered regarding Bonhoeffer's christological foundation for reality. In the section immediately following his explanation of the nature of reality, "Ecce homo!," he identifies the image of the crucified and rejected Christ at the center of history. The suffering, rejected Christ stands at the crossroads between God and the world. Upon hearing his words in this brief section, one cannot help but think of the context in which he was writing:

Ecce homo! Behold the man! In Him the world was reconciled with God. It is not by its overthrowing but by its reconciliation that the world is subdued. It is not by ideals and programmes or by conscience, duty, responsibility and virtue that reality can be confronted and overcome, but simply and solely by the perfect love of God. Here again it is not by a general idea of love that this is achieved, but by the really lived love of God in Jesus Christ. This love of God does not withdraw from reality into noble souls secluded from the world. It experiences and suffers the reality of the world in all its hardness. The world exhausts its fury against the body of Christ. But, tormented, He forgives the world its sin. That is how the reconciliation is accomplished. Ecce homo!<sup>22</sup>

Bonhoeffer said the figure of the Reconciler comes between God and the world, filling the center of all history. Further, He

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<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 70.

follows a path of humiliation and atonement, taking on undeserved guilt along the way.<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer then goes on in the next three sections to show how confused ethical values become when they are not grounded in the humiliated Christ. First, he juxtaposes the One who was despised by men with "the despiser of men." His contrast between the person of Christ and Hitler is clear. He says,

The news that God has become man strikes at the very heart of an age in which both the good and the wicked regard either scorn for man or the idolization of man as the highest attainable wisdom. . . . At such a time as this it is easy for the tyrannical despiser of men to exploit the baseness of the human heart, nurturing it and calling it by other names. Fear he calls responsibility. Desire he calls keenness. Irresolution becomes solidarity. Brutality becomes masterfulness. . . . For the tyrannical despiser of men popularity is the token of the highest love of mankind.<sup>24</sup>

In the next section, "The Successful Man," Bonhoeffer juxtaposes the guilt, shame, and death of Christ with the successful man who "strides forward from one deed to the next, conquering the future and securing the irrevocability of what has been done."<sup>25</sup> Against this person, characterized by a false standard of success stands the crucified Christ who demonstrates success' true meaning.<sup>26</sup> Without explicitly stating his points

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<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 70-71.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> "The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard . . . He is not concerned with success or failure but with the willing acceptance of God's judgement. Only in this judgement is there reconciliation with God and among men. Christ confronts all thinking in terms of success and failure with the man who is under God's sentence, no matter whether he is successful or unsuccessful. It is out of

of contrast, Bonhoeffer showed how mixed up ethical values had become under the reign of Hitler, and how only the humiliated Christ could point the way to a clear vision of a restored reality.

In his third section, Bonhoeffer pointed to a disastrous confusion between life and death that occurs when one's view of reality becomes skewed.<sup>27</sup> Christ's resurrection stands as the miraculous event that makes nonsense of what he termed "the idolization of death" that was prevalent at that time in Germany.<sup>28</sup> In all three of these brief sections, Bonhoeffer delineated how a confusion of basic values occurs, and how only Christ can provide a way back. He points to the re-evaluation of values which occurs through Christ. Further, he asserts that, "[i]t was precisely the cross of Christ, the failure of Christ in the world, which led to His success in history . . . "<sup>29</sup> To a world that measures and justifies itself in terms of success, the figure of the sentenced and crucified Christ will remain a stranger, or at best, an object of pity.<sup>30</sup>

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pure love that God is willing to let man stand before Him, and that is why He sentences man. It is a sentence of mercy that God pronounces on mankind in Christ." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> "There is no clearer indication of the idolization of death than when a period claims to be building for eternity and yet life has no value in this period, or when big words are spoken of a new man, of a new world and of a new society which is to be ushered in, and yet all that is new is the destruction of life as we have it. The drastic acceptance or rejection of earthly life reveals that only death has any value here. To clutch at everything or to cast away everything is the reaction of one who believes fanatically in death." Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 75.



In such christological words we see the humiliated, crucified Christ who was rejected by humanity. Thus, Bonhoeffer employs the terms of the theology of the cross in three ways: (1) the explicit focus on the crucified Christ as the only way to perceive reality truthfully, (2) the re-evaluation of values that occurs when one holds up conventional values against that of the cross, and (3) the hidden nature of Christ's revelation in the world--people don't perceive it because it stands in contrast with what otherwise seems normative. Thus, we see Bonhoeffer holding up a theology of the cross as the specific guide post for ethics in this context.

Finally, we would be incomplete in our portrayal of Bonhoeffer's christological vision as it is articulated in this first phase of his writing if we did not mention the way he discussed how Christ takes shape in the world, in reality. The notion of "conformation" is ingredient to Bonhoeffer's overall ethical thought, particularly his ethic of reality, for this is the way he concretely discusses the "social content" of his ethic, since it is singly informed by the person Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer spells out what he means by the form of Christ taking shape in the world:

The word 'formation' arouses our suspicion. We are sick and tired of Christian programmes . . . The word 'formation', therefore, must be taken in quite a different sense from that to which we are accustomed. . . . Their primary concern is not with the forming of a world by means of plans and programmes. Whenever they speak of forming they are concerned only with the one form which has overcome the world, the form of Jesus Christ. Formation can only come from this form. But here again it is not a question of applying directly to the world the teaching of Christ or what are referred to as Christian principles, so that the world might be formed in accordance with these. On the contrary, formation comes only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ. It comes only as formation

in His likeness, as conformation with the unique form of Him who was made man, was crucified, and rose again.<sup>31</sup>

several things are to be noted in Bonhoeffer's notion of conformation to Christ. First, he cannot emphasize enough the social nature of this ethical concept--that it cannot boil down to a program or plan which may be executed with human initiative and insight. Bonhoeffer points only to Christ, emphasizing the fact that He is the one who does the "molding." Secondly, as an ethical theme, Christian activity is grounded in a passivity at its base.<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer ingeniously weds a christological emphasis with an ethical motif here.<sup>33</sup> Thirdly, we conform to the

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<sup>31</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> "This [conformation] is not achieved by dint of efforts 'to become like Jesus', which is the way in which we usually interpret it. It is achieved only when the form of Jesus Christ itself works upon us in such a manner that it moulds our form in its own likeness. (Gal. 4:19)." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 80. See also Clifford Green, "Textual Research for the New Edition," Old Europe and New Frontiers, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> For the sake of maintaining the focus of this chapter, we shall only briefly mention Bonhoeffer's important concept of the 'ultimate' and the 'penultimate', which he articulated during his second phase of writing the Ethics (November 1940-February 1941). We draw attention to this category because it was here that Bonhoeffer articulated a way in which a world come of age may exhibit its autonomy in a responsible way.

He argued that during the last two hundred years the spiritual situation of western Christendom has called the ultimate, (the last things, i.e., God's grace) into question at an increasing rate, imperiling the stability of the penultimate (the next to last things, i.e., proclaiming the grace of God). In other words, humanity and goodness should not acquire a value of their own, but they should be claimed for Jesus Christ.

For Bonhoeffer, the point in drawing out these complementary realities is to establish personhood as a penultimate to justification by faith. See Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 134. Hence, the ethical behavior of autonomous persons for another person can never be more than a testimony to the ultimate gift of God's justification of humanity. Rather than discredit the role of human endeavor in the world, then, Bonhoeffer attempts to show the necessity for such moral action in the name of a greater reality, God's grace. As Larry Rasmussen pointed out in his 1990 Bonhoeffer seminar at Union Theological Seminary, this is

image of the Incarnate, the Crucified and the Resurrected One. Bonhoeffer warns against establishing a separate theology or ethic on the basis of only one.<sup>34</sup>

Whereas Bonhoeffer gave exclusive emphasis to the crucified Christ in earlier sections ("Ecce Homo!", "The Despiser of Men," "The Successful Man," and "The Idolization of Death") the context of his remarks clarify such a highlight. However, given the contextual emphasis on the crucified Christ, this does not take away from the fact that Bonhoeffer's christological emphasis is fully in line with a theologia crucis. Such an emphasis provided the critical vantage point by which Bonhoeffer judged the ethical standards reigning under Hitler's rule askew, and giving him the clarity of vision to call for a "re-ordering of values" in light of the crucified Christ. While we see the unity in Bonhoeffer's christological ethic of reality and notion of conformation, his emphasis on the crucified Christ suggests the kind of christology guiding this ethical vision and the critique which lay therein.

But what does this christological basis have to do with his notion of human autonomy? The way Bonhoeffer articulates this ethic of reality with his theme of conformation, God's concrete commands and human obedience to them occur as indicative ethical

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Bonhoeffer's ingenious way of suggesting ethics, not as a precondition of grace (as Luther would have it), but as a foreteller, a proclaimer of grace. Further, it serves as a key for maintaining the difference between God and persons. For, while the notion of autonomous persons in a new age might seem to risk eclipsing the notion of God, Bonhoeffer's ethics-eschatology distinction augurs well the distinction.

<sup>34</sup> He discusses this in his section on 'The Ultimate and the Penultimate' where he says, "It is quite wrong to establish a separate theology of the incarnation, a theology of the cross, or a theology of the resurrection, each in opposition to the others, by a misconceived absolutization of one of these parts; it is equally wrong to apply the same procedure to a consideration of the Christian life. . . . Only in the unity is the conflict resolved." Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 131.

acts, not ones that are imperatively assigned. God's authority in the world is discussed in terms of formation, an indicative motif, more so than mandate, an imperative one. The human person is placed into the reality of the world, acting responsibly in it as a result of christological formation, which shapes the attitudes and actions of the individual. 'Ethics as command' is not prevalent in this portion of his Ethics, but it is a theme much discussed by Bonhoeffer in the last stage of his writing. By determining these twin christological emphases in his Ethics, we come away with a much clearer picture of the contours and content of human autonomy.

#### B. Bonhoeffer's Conservative Social Structure of Authority: Superiority and Inferiority in his Ethic of Command

##### 1. A Conservative Social Structure as Warrant for Ethical Discourse

We turn now to Bonhoeffer's last phase of writing Ethics, which occurred between the end of 1942 and 5 April 1943. As was mentioned earlier, Larry Rasmussen has documented the fact that Bonhoeffer read the galley-proofs of Barth's Church Dogmatics II/2, "The Command of God," in May of 1942, and relied on them heavily in his discussion of "ethics as command," even though he does not explicitly mention Barth.<sup>35</sup> Rasmussen has carefully depicted the extent to which Bonhoeffer relied on his mentor and deviated from him.<sup>36</sup> He concludes that whereas the emphasis for

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<sup>35</sup> See Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer--His Significance for North Americans, op. cit., pp. 98-110, esp. pp. 98-101.

<sup>36</sup> Rasmussen points out the classically Bonhoefferian themes of obedience, christocentricity of the command, the full embracing of life by the command and the conferring of freedom

Barth is a constant accountability before God, Bonhoeffer's is, rather, of God's permission for persons to live fully, as more than takers of ethical decisions.<sup>37</sup> In this portion of this study, we shall investigate another kind of difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer, one which suggests a conservatism in Bonhoeffer's understanding of God's command that is altogether absent in Barth's. What we find of interest is that the "superiority-inferiority" motif runs strong in this fifth phase of writing. We know this emphasis does not come from Barth because he expressed discontent with Bonhoeffer's strong reliance on this kind of social ordering in his Church Dogmatics III/4.<sup>38</sup> We shall explore the ramifications of Bonhoeffer's employment of this conservative social structure not only to determine the reasoning behind such a surprising motif, but to aid in our determination of the relationship between his ethic of command and formation.

It has been suggested by some that Bonhoeffer utilized a conservative, even oppressive, order of social structure. Recently, at the 1992 Sixth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference in New York City, Union Theological Seminary, one Bonhoeffer scholar, Stephen Plant, presented a paper, taking up Barth's concern. Plant wondered whether Bonhoeffer's mandates theology "does not seek to re-establish a tolerant authoritarianism which, whilst providing safeguards for the inferior,

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which predate Bonhoeffer's reading of Church Dogmatics 2/2, as well as the fact that there are changes in, and additions to, the material used from 2/2 to clarify Bonhoeffer's distinction from Barth in this instance. Rasmussen, op. cit., pp. 101-103.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> See p. 147 *infra*, for Barth's estimation of Bonhoeffer's use of the superiority-inferiority category.

legitimizes the retention by the superior of control and power."<sup>39</sup> Is Bonhoeffer trapped within the confines of a German patriarchalism? And what are the ramifications of this social structure for Bonhoeffer's understanding of human autonomy?

Bonhoeffer opens his section on "The 'Ethical' and the 'Christian'" by determining the warrant for ethical discourse. For Bonhoeffer, the concrete warrant and authorization for ethical discourse is just as important as the actual content of an ethical assertion.<sup>40</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the warrant is not something persons can assign to themselves. Rather, it is an imparted authorization, assigned not primarily on the basis of subjective accomplishments and merit, but on the basis of an objective position in the world.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer says authorization for ethical discourse is conferred upon the old man and not upon the young one, upon the father and not the child, the master and not the servant.<sup>42</sup> This is where he brings in the category of the superior and the inferior:

What finds expression here is that disparity which is so extremely offensive to modern sensibilities but which is inherent and essential in the ethical, namely, the disparity between the superior and the inferior. Without this objective subordination of the lower to the higher, and without that courage to accept superiority which modern man has so completely lost, ethical discourse is dissipated in

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen Plant, "'A Suggestion of North German Patriarchalism': A Materialist Duologue with the Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," Unpublished paper delivered at the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Conference, New York City, Union Theological Seminary, 17 August 1992, p. 8. (On file at Bonhoeffer Archive, Union Theological Seminary).

<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 271.

<sup>41</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.



generalities, it lacks an object and its essential character is destroyed.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the ethical implies certain definite sociological relations in which authority and subordination are cast and delegated as separate realities. Paramount to Bonhoeffer in this scheme is the fact that such a social order is a concrete relation between the giver and receiver of commands, not a formal rational principle.<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer then makes some important qualifications for what he knows can be an easily misunderstood schema.

He affirms the legacy of the Enlightenment in which this social order came to expression, reminding the reader of the social order which preceded it:

In its polemical context the Enlightenment must still be allowed to have been right to oppose a system under which society was divided into privileged and unprivileged sections. The ethical is in actual fact connected with the universally and humanly rational; and in actual fact the inherent tendency of the ethical, in its subordination of the inferior to the superior, does not in any way imply a sanctioning of privileges.<sup>45</sup>

The Enlightenment went wrong when it made a formal abstract principle of human reason, according to Bonhoeffer. However, he still sees it offering a corrective to any attempt to misuse the ethical as a sanction for privilege.<sup>46</sup> Trying to clear the path

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<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, pp. 271-72.

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 274.

for this social structure as a legitimate one for ethics, he defines exactly what he means by such an order.

First, he says what superiority does not mean. "Superiority does not consist in the subjective value of the superior man, but derives its legitimation from a concrete objective commission."<sup>47</sup> The warrant goes with the office, not with the person. Bonhoeffer argues that ethical chaos results if this relation is tampered with, as can be seen in the father who derives his authority from his children's confidence in him and the government which derives its authority from its popularity.<sup>48</sup> The authorization for ethical discourse is conferred upon those who hold authority by the nature of their office, and Bonhoeffer lists some of these: the old man, not the young; the father, not the child; the master, not the servant; the teacher, not the student, etc.

Before he goes on to discuss how God's command differs from the ethical, Bonhoeffer rejects a particular ethical approach, and in so doing, clarifies his understanding of the superior and inferior social structure. He denounces the positivistic approach to ethics<sup>49</sup> because it finds the warrant for ethical discourse in reality as it is given, without any further attempt at explanation. To him, it contained no criteria beyond the reality which is given at any particular time and which can always change.<sup>50</sup> When the positivistic approach succeeds, actual

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<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 275.

<sup>49</sup> As from the tradition of the nineteenth century conservative romanticist J. Stahl, and in the twentieth century by the Catholic, Max Scheler.

<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 275.

power comes to be regarded as the sole criterion for the warrant. Bonhoeffer contends that there are other criteria beyond the positive data for the classification of authorities and of their warrants, specifically, the warrant coming by divine appointment. Determination of the meaning bound up in such a divinely ordered warrant, then, becomes paramount. Bonhoeffer turns to that issue next.

## 2. The Object Lying Beyond the Ethical: 'The Commandment of God'

In discussing the commandment of God, we come to the heart of Bonhoeffer's statements about the divinely ordered social structure of superiority and inferiority. God's commandment is described as something different from the ethical. It is unconditional, total, embracing the whole of life. While it forbids and commands it also permits; not only does it bind, but it sets free by binding.<sup>51</sup> In short, it is an absolute and concrete claim laid to persons by God in Jesus Christ.<sup>52</sup> One of its chief aspects is that it "establishes on earth an inviolable superiority and inferiority which are independent of the factual relations of power and weakness."<sup>53</sup> Bonhoeffer does not elaborate on what he means by "the factual relations of power and weakness," but he seems to be alluding to a positivistic connotation, meaning the relations of power and weakness as they occur in reality. This would suggest that he is emphasizing a

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<sup>51</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 277.

<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 279.

disparity between human social expressions of power and weakness and the way God intends for such a category to be understood.

God's command confronts the world in the four mandates: church, marriage and family, culture, and government. In defining exactly what he means by mandate, Bonhoeffer states:

It is the legitimation and warrant for the execution of a definite divine commandment, the conferment of divine authority on an earthly agent. The term 'mandate' must also be taken to imply the claiming, the seizure and the formation of a definite earthly domain by the divine commandment.<sup>54</sup>

Once again, we find Bonhoeffer emphasizing the social structure of superiority-inferiority in relation to the divine mandate. Bearers of the mandate do not receive their commission from below--they are "deputies and representatives of God." As such, the sphere of the mandate is established in an unalterable relation of superiority and inferiority.<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, yet again, qualifies what he means by these terms in three ways saying that (1) it is not identical with an earthly relation of superior and inferior power;<sup>56</sup> (2) that the mandate establishes inferiority as well as superiority; and (3) that they represent a relation of persons, not of concepts or things.

For Bonhoeffer, this conservative social structure is essential to his overall ethical enterprise.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, it

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<sup>54</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 287.

<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 289.

<sup>56</sup> Indeed, "On the contrary . . . the divine mandate . . . corrects and regulates the earthly relations of superior and inferior power in its own way." Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 289.

<sup>57</sup> "The genuine order of superior and inferior draws its life from belief in the commission from 'above', belief in the 'Lord of lords'. This belief alone can exorcize the demonic forces

virtually hinges on such a category. A clearly differentiated relation of superiority and inferiority is obtained when the word of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is proclaimed in church.<sup>58</sup>

In the church the word is proclaimed as one commandment--God's revelation in Jesus Christ--and Bonhoeffer points out two important factors therein which reveal his attitude toward an autonomous humanity. First, the cross of atonement sets one free for life before God in the midst of a godless world. It sets one free for life in genuine worldliness. Thus, Bonhoeffer speaks of a positive "worldliness" (as we see again in the letters from prison) and how the cross unleashes one in freedom to participate in it. Secondly, the commandment of Jesus Christ rules over the Church, family, culture and government, but it does so, simultaneously setting each of these mandates free for the fulfillment of its allotted function. In the same way, Jesus Christ as Lord emancipates the four mandated areas to realize their essential character, which is grounded in Christ. In this way, Bonhoeffer overcomes heteronomy (godless humanity seeking its own deification, displacing God) and autonomy (humanity that is detached from God's commandments) with Christonomy--Jesus Christ's ruling over the world, thereby, setting it free, free for others, pro aliis. Freedom, then, operates at the heart of Bonhoeffer's notion of God's rule in Jesus Christ.<sup>59</sup>

Further, Bonhoeffer's understanding of superiority and inferiority does not provide the basis for any kind of domina-

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which emerge from below. The collapse of this belief means the total collapse and destruction of the whole structure and order which is established in the world from above." Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 290-91.

<sup>58</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 293.

<sup>59</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 297-99.

tion.<sup>60</sup> The irony surrounding Bonhoeffer's tenacious affirmation of this ordered concept comes to the fore: while he obviously saw the danger in using such a category because of the way it could be exploited and lead to domination, he stubbornly held onto it, arguing not only the collapse of an entire ethical system with its dismissal, but its clear distinction as freedom, apart from twisted human understandings of superiority and inferiority.

Upon such evidence of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the superior-inferior social construct, one must ask along with Barth:

Is it enough to say that these particular relationships of rank and degree occur with a certain regularity in the Bible, and that they can be more or less clearly related to Christ as the Lord of the world? Again, does the relationship always have to be one of superiority and inferiority? In Bonhoeffer's doctrine of the mandates, is there not just a suggestion of North German Patriarchalism? Is the notion of authority of some over others really more characteristic of the ethical event than that of the freedom of even the very lowest before the very highest?<sup>61</sup>

Is Barth right, that Bonhoeffer is bound by a certain "patriarchal" frame of thinking? And is Stephen Plant correct, that Bonhoeffer's ethic does not allow for liberation from below, that it seeks to "re-establish a tolerant authoritarianism which, whilst providing safeguards for the inferior, legitimates the retention by the superior of control and power?"<sup>62</sup> Before we

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>61</sup> See Plant, op. cit., p. 8; Church Dogmatics III/4, p. 22.

<sup>62</sup> Plant, op. cit., p. 8.



offer up our own conclusions, Bonhoeffer offers his own response and addresses the matter.

During his third phase of writing Ethics (March to October 1941) Bonhoeffer articulated the notion of an "ethic of responsibility." We already saw in his fifth writing phase how he came to articulate God's commandment in terms of freedom--God's command which is a setting free. Here, during his third phase, he takes up the issue directly in such a way that clarifies his own estimation of the superior-inferior social paradigm. What he has to say about the relationship between free responsibility and obedience yields insight into his separation of the social order into superior and inferior, the strong and the weak. The quotation is lengthy, but necessary to show Bonhoeffer's thought about the social order:

It must seem at first sight as though everything we have said about free responsibility is applicable in practice only when a man finds himself in what we call a 'responsible position' in life, in other words when he has to take independent decisions on the very largest scale. What connexion can there be between responsibility and the monotonous daily work of the labourer, the factory worker, the clerk, the private soldier, the apprentice or the schoolboy? It is a different matter already with the owner-farmer, the industrial contractor, the politician or statesman, the general, the master craftsman, the teacher and the judge. But in their lives, too, how much there is of technique and duty and how little of really free decision! And so it seems that everything we have said about responsibility can in the end apply only to a very small group of men, and even to these only in a few moments of their lives; and consequently it seems as though for the great majority of men one must speak not of responsibility but of obedience and duty. This implies one ethic for the great and the strong, for the rulers, and another for the small and the weak, the subordinates; on the one hand responsibility and on the other obedience, on the one hand freedom and on the other subservience. And indeed there can be no doubt that in our modern social order, and especially in the German one, the life of the individual is so exactly defined and regulated, and is at the same time assured of such complete security, that it is granted

to only very few men to breathe the free air of the wide open spaces of great decisions and to experience the hazard of responsible action which is entirely their own. In consequence of the compulsory regulation of life in accordance with a definite course of training and vocational activity, our lives have come to be relatively free from ethical dangers; the individual who from his childhood on has had to take his assigned place in accordance with this principle is ethically emasculated; he has been robbed of the creative moral power, freedom. In this we see a deep seated fault in the essential development of our modern social order, a fault which can be countered only with a clear exposition of the fundamental concept of responsibility . . . Yet it would be an error if we were to continue to look at the problem from this point of view. There is, in fact, no single life which cannot experience the situation of responsibility; every life can experience this situation in its most characteristic form, that is to say, in the encounter with other people. Even when free responsibility is more or less excluded from a man's vocational and public life, he nevertheless always stands in a responsible relation to other men.<sup>63</sup>

The quotation is telling--Bonhoeffer identified a "deep-seated fault" in the essential development of the modern social order. That fault has to do with a regimented social order which divides persons into great and small, strong and weak, rulers and subordinates. Further, he identified the fact that such a regulated division in social structure seriously inhibits the ethical development of persons.

Bonhoeffer said the only way to counter this huge social developmental error is with a clear understanding of the concept of responsibility. He then went on to affirm that responsibility is not a category reserved for a certain type of person; every individual can experience the situation of responsibility. Wherever a person meets another person--there arises genuine

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<sup>63</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 250-51. (Emphasis added).

responsibility, and these responsible relationships cannot be supplanted by any general regulation or routine.<sup>64</sup>

But Bonhoeffer said we should go one step further: responsibility not only stands side by side with relationships of obedience, it also has its place within these relationships.<sup>65</sup> Hence, "obedience and responsibility are interlinked in such a way that one cannot say that responsibility begins only where obedience leaves off, but rather that obedience is rendered in responsibility."<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer effectively reassigns obedience and responsibility as a unified idea, applicable to everyone, whereas before in his context in Germany, obedience was seen as the appropriate response for the weak and responsibility was reserved for the strong. By bringing the motifs of obedience and responsibility together, Bonhoeffer gives expression to an ethical concept that is inclusive and liberating for all. Ultimately responsibility implies a tension between obedience and freedom so that the responsible person delivers up one's self and one's deed to God.<sup>67</sup>

In light of Bonhoeffer's statements about the structure of responsibility, what is one to make of his understanding of the social order, particularly in terms of superiority and inferiority? Is this a legitimate social structure for him after all? Do his statements on responsibility in his third phase of writing contradict his later statements about God's command and the 'inviolability' of the superior-inferior social structure

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<sup>64</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 251.

<sup>65</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 252.

<sup>67</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 253.

inherent within it? And lastly, is Bonhoeffer inextricably trapped within a patriarchal way of thinking, as Barth suggested?

### 3. Conclusions Regarding the Terms of Bonhoeffer's Social Structure of Authority

Several comments are in order regarding Bonhoeffer's notion of and regard for the social ordering of persons in superior and inferior terms. First, we must remember that superiority and inferiority had more to do, for him, with the issue of determining the warrant and authorization in ethical discourse than with the ethical content of the category and how it "plays out" in society. At least this was true in his section on God's commandment. In his third writing phase, in the section on responsibility, however, Bonhoeffer explicitly acknowledges that much damage has been done as this social order has developed and taken hold in German society.

We also note there, however, that while he comes up with a solution (the structure of responsibility) he does not negate the social order in and of itself. He does provide a clear concept and structure of responsibility to inform that order. Even so, while Bonhoeffer does not explicitly reject the superior-inferior social category, his focus moves away from defending such an order, as we see him do in his section on the divine mandates, to pointing the way to a new understanding of responsibility that is applicable to everyone. The fact that in the Letters and Papers from Prison he never again speaks in terms of superiority and inferiority, but does continue the themes he raised with his notion of responsibility--deputyship, freedom--suggests the more enduring aspect of Bonhoeffer's overall emphasis.

One might say that the superiority-inferiority category was an essential and unnegotiable aspect of his understanding of that which lay beyond the ethical--the command of God--while it became a questionable category for his ethics, insofar as it had been exploited as an ethical concept in German modern society. At the risk of sounding inconsistent in drawing such a conclusion, one must remember that Bonhoeffer acknowledged very clearly that the superior-inferior structure was a divinely ordered relationship whose meaning is gathered in terms of God's command, not "factual relations of power and weakness."

That brings us to Karl Barth's conclusion--that Bonhoeffer evidences a "North German Patriarchalism." Whereas Bonhoeffer does show evidence for this in his relentless advocacy of this category in his concept of God's command, he is not irrevocably trapped by it either, as his notion of responsibility demonstrates. Further, in a letter from prison dated 23 January 1944, Bonhoeffer explores the notion of 'friendship,' finding it difficult to classify sociologically. He concludes that it is a category sui generis, belonging "not to the sphere of obedience, but to the broad area of freedom, which surrounds all three spheres of the divine mandates."<sup>68</sup> That Bonhoeffer is aware of his conservative tendency toward order, structure and classification is apparent in the prison letter.<sup>69</sup> His candid thoughts on this topic indicate that Bonhoeffer readily subjected his own structure of authority to critique, revising it accordingly

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<sup>68</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 192, 193. Please refer to Appendix III for a full transcription of Bonhoeffer's discussion of friendship as well as his poem on the subject in honor of Eberhard Bethge.

<sup>69</sup> Please refer to Appendix III to indicate Bonhoeffer's self-conscious critique.

whenever convinced of its shortcomings. We saw this in his move from the order of 'preservation'<sup>70</sup> to the mandates; we saw it in his candid questioning of the viability of the superior-inferior social order; and we see it now with his open thoughts on the sociological status of friendship. More than being guilty of a North German patriarchalism, Bonhoeffer proves himself a humble revisionist, constantly restructuring his understanding of authority due to sociality underlying his theology.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps Bonhoeffer's greatest weakness in holding up the paradigm of superiority and inferiority is the way such a scheme contradicts the essence of his critique of religion. Bonhoeffer believed the character of "religion" was that of "privilege" and "tutelage." Not only did he fight against the dangerously privileged character of the Christian religion throughout his life, but he saw closely connected the role it plays as the "guardian" of "immature" persons, who have not come of age. As Bethge elaborated:

'Religious interpretation' is an interpretation of the Gospel of the powerlessness of Christ that establishes priests (as the givers of life) or theologians (as the custodians of truth) as the guardians and the rulers of the people of the Church, creating and perpetuating a situation of dependence. Nothing will be as difficult as overcoming the monarchical and patriarchal structures of hierarchies, theologies and, indeed,

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<sup>70</sup> In 1932 Bonhoeffer had juxtaposed the notion of 'order of preservation' to avoid the dangerous connotation being propounded by right wing theological interpretations of 'order of creation'. Now, based on his assessment of the person's relation to the world, he replaced "'the sphere of the regnum Christi' with the less static idea of 'mandate'. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pp. 621, 622.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Charles West, 'Ground Under our Feet,' in "New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics", Guy Carter, Rene van Eyden et al., eds., Bonhoeffer's Ethics. Old Europe and New Frontiers, (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), p. 41.



dogmas, for coming of age has an element about it that is alarmingly unreassuring.<sup>72</sup>

Further, he lacks Biblical evidence to support it in the ultimate way that he does. Further, an inconsistency arises between the way Bonhoeffer understands the relationship of superiority-inferiority in his description of God's command (it is objectively tied to the office, not the person) and the structure of responsibility (it applies to every person, regardless of their "station.")

Finally, we come to Plant's concern--that Bonhoeffer seeks to provide safeguards for the inferior while legitimating the retention of control and power by the superior. If Plant's conclusion is correct, then he is surely right that such an ethic does not allow for liberation from below. We respond to such a conclusion by stating that Bonhoeffer's choice of social order leaves itself open to be interpreted as an ethic which houses a tolerant authoritarianism at its base. That Bonhoeffer actually sought to "re-establish" a tolerant authoritarianism, as Plant suggests, is, however, another matter, and it is an enterprise he did not attempt.

Again, one must remember whose authority Bonhoeffer was trying to "seal" with the superior-inferior structure. His concern was with the ethical as a mandate coming from God to humanity, not as an ethical structure in itself. However, this is not to take away from the fact that Bonhoeffer did not reject a basic division between the strong, powerful, and superior, and the weak, subordinate, and inferior. We say "did not reject" because Bonhoeffer seemed to move away from this category as a

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<sup>72</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pp. 780-81.

social construct with his notion of responsibility, and he never referred to it again in his prison letters.

Further, we deny that Bonhoeffer legitimates the retention of control and power by the superior in his mandates theology, as Plant concludes. This is so because Bonhoeffer fundamentally weds superiority to the concept of responsibility in his discussion on God's command. Plant assumes that superiority connotes a retention of power and control in Bonhoeffer, whereas the latter discusses the motif in terms of responsibility in the fifth phase of writing<sup>73</sup> and, indeed, seems to move away from it with his notion of responsibility and its structure in his third section. Once one looks very closely at the definition Bonhoeffer attaches to the "superior" and the way in which he is suggesting it, it becomes evident that it fundamentally cannot legitimate privilege, exploitation, or domination over others because Bonhoeffer discusses it fundamentally in terms of responsibility and obedience.

Unfortunately, the terms "superiority" and "inferiority" carry so much baggage with them today, this is the greatest obstacle for their reception among scholars and followers of Bonhoeffer, not to mention their overall viability as social constructs. These terms have become politically loaded, carrying negative connotations. Interestingly, Bonhoeffer himself seemed to back off from such a socially-ordered concept once he

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<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Bonhoeffer several times tries to allay the fear that by affirming "superiority" domination in any form may be suggested. While Plant does not seem to be suggesting that Bonhoeffer's understanding of the mandates legitimates domination (a negative term) neither is Bonhoeffer's intent to legitimate retention of power and control, (positive and negative terms.) He is seeking to legitimate the responsible use of power more than insure who has that power, even though, admittedly, the social structure he uses can lend itself to such an interpretation.

recognized its negative affect in modern German culture. However, we would be amiss to reject this notion in Bonhoeffer out of hand because it becomes clear that he was trying to say something different with this order. In the end, he ended up dropping it, as the letters from prison show. There, he builds on notions like deputyship and autonomy--ideas which have unique import for how we may understand the language of command and obedience anew.

Although some may not like to admit it, Bonhoeffer did show the way to a new understanding of terms like "command" and "superior-inferior" in the Ethics. In the process, he began pointing to a new language, a non-religious one that would make more sense to a "mature" generation. By looking at his Ethics we saw how two christological emphases came forth, informing ethical action. Addressing his ethical thought to an increasingly "godless world" characterized by an independence and autonomy heretofore unknown, Bonhoeffer held up the images of the crucified Christ to whom we conform and the commanding Christ to whom we respond to inform a grown up age as to the nature of its power. Conformation to the shape of Christ as well as freely chosen response to God's command set the terms for how a world come of age can exercise its autonomy and be true to its form.

#### 4. Conclusions Regarding Bonhoeffer's Christological Ethics in Terms of Conformation and Command

We have examined the two motifs of conformation and command which run throughout Bonhoeffer's Ethics. Rather than conclude that his thematic of command is subordinate to his notion of

conformation, however, as Larry Rasmussen does<sup>74</sup> we conclude that both thematics are resolved in a unified way with Bonhoeffer's concept of responsibility as it is delineated in the Ethics and with his understanding of the hiddenness of God's power as weakness in Letters and Papers from Prison. By laying out the structure of the responsible life in terms of deputyship, correspondence with reality, acceptance of guilt, and freedom, the vicissitudes and disparities that ultimately separate those whom the world would deem the weak from the strong, Bonhoeffer overcomes such divisions with an inclusive motif. Already we have seen in his notion of freedom how the relationship between responsibility and obedience, as he defined it, does away with any privileged understandings for whom freely chosen ethical action is possible. Bonhoeffer focuses on the relationship between persons as a whole, leaving behind class distinctions and divisions. Further, as we have seen in chapter one, Bonhoeffer spoke of the true nature of God's power or rule in the world in terms of the christological vicarious principle, 'being there for others.' God's command takes the form of selfless service for others on the cross. In this way, command and conformation to Christ intersect, modifying each other dialectically so that there is no choice between two methods.

Before leaving the Ethics, we pause to take a brief look at one of his other ethical notions which stems from his theologia crucis and which informs his understanding of human autonomy--the notion of deputyship. With this, Bonhoeffer shows us with

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<sup>74</sup> Both in the summary of his chapter 'A Question of Method,' in "New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics," Old Europe and New Frontiers, p. 43 and in his book Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans, op. cit., pp. 105-110.

another motif the contours by which an autonomous humanity may understand itself.

Responsibility characterizes the picture of persons living in an increasingly secularized, modernized world. Bonhoeffer indicated that responsibility is fundamentally a matter of "deputyship":

Deputyship, and therefore responsibility, lies only in the complete surrender of one's own life to the other man. Only the selfless man lives responsibly, and this means that only the selfless man lives . . . Jesus, life, our life, lived in deputyship for us as the incarnate Son of God, and that is why through Him all life is in essence a life of deputyship . . . [i]n this real deputyship which constitutes His human existence He is the responsible person par excellence.<sup>75</sup>

The connection between responsibility as deputyship and the nature of human autonomy is evident in the way Bonhoeffer describes Christ as the responsible person par excellence. The responsible person will act selflessly, as a deputy in behalf of the other. Bonhoeffer spoke of such action as "selfless self-assertion."<sup>76</sup>

In the theologia crucis, humility plays an important role, and it is present in Bonhoeffer in a way which is not true for Luther. While Luther certainly asserts humility as a fundamental condition of the disciple following the way of the cross, the prevailing connotation is that of resignation, lowliness, or nothingness.<sup>77</sup> For Luther, humility is perfected self-knowledge,

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<sup>75</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 224.

<sup>76</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., p. 222.

<sup>77</sup> Walter von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, p. 130.

and its boundary is love to the neighbor. Indeed, the way of humility is from the inside out, not from the outside in.<sup>78</sup>

Bonhoeffer takes Luther's idea and releases it from its introverted nature, arguing that there is a way to embody humility externally in "selfless self-assertion" toward one's neighbor. Whereas humility for Luther is characterized as resignation and self-knowledge, for Bonhoeffer it is no less than a selfless ethical act that points to the ultimate humility of Christ. Love to one's neighbor is humility's boundary for Luther; that is precisely where it begins for Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer gives an ethical-eschatological interpretation to humility with the notion of deputyship, allowing it to connote the selflessness Luther desired, yet surpassing his narrow ethical parameters.

As Bonhoeffer grappled with how an increasingly modern and autonomous age understands itself in increasingly godless terms in the Ethics, he offers up ethical motifs as they are defined in terms of the theologia crucis by which humanity may understand its increased power and independence. Human autonomy is characterized as free responsible action, deputyship and acceptance of guilt, all of which are the building blocks of Bonhoeffer's ethic of responsibility as well as Luther's cross-centered theology. These concepts are not arbitrarily incorporated into Bonhoeffer's ethical thought, but gain their meaning from the terms of this theology of the cross which had developed over a period of years in his life and thought.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 131-32.

<sup>79</sup> One scholar rightly points out the nature of the misunderstanding which tends to surround some of Bonhoeffer's key motifs in the Ethics: "We have become accustomed, perhaps especially in North America, to treat 'responsibility,' 'warrant,' and



## II. Letters and Papers from Prison: Toward a Dialectical Understanding of Human Power

In Letters and Papers from Prison we see how key terms Bonhoeffer used to characterize human autonomy appear again, this time in even more profound expression as his theologia crucis came to full fruition. Human autonomy is discussed there in terms of the new period in human history that has moved past a "religious" consciousness and toward a "world come of age" consciousness. Bonhoeffer embraced this non-religious world, casting away "religion" as a mere garment of Christianity, not the thing itself.<sup>80</sup>

We look now to see how Bonhoeffer came to discuss human autonomy in terms of a "non-religious interpretation" and a "world come of age," and how these anthropological expressions gain their meaning in terms of his theology of the cross. More specifically, we shall show how Bonhoeffer understood and expressed human power paradigmatically in dialectical relation to God's weakness.

We begin by looking at Bonhoeffer's concept of religion and the nature of his critique. Gustavo Gutierrez, in his well-known book, The Power of the Poor in History, said, "It seems to me

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'deputyship' as theological concepts that have applications to political ethics. We cannot appreciate the originality and creativity of Bonhoeffer's Ethics until we see that he encountered these first as political ideas. He was able to give them a broader meaning and to provide normative guidance for the dilemmas of resistance precisely by relating them to theological concepts of vicarious action and accountability before God." Robin W. Lovin, 'The Biographical Context of Bonhoeffer's Ethics,' in "New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics," p. 45. In full agreement with Lovin, the theologia crucis is just that theological framework out of which Bonhoeffer gave meaning and breadth to his politically-motivated ethical concepts.

<sup>80</sup> See Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 30 April 1944, p. 280.

that, for Bonhoeffer, the notion of religion is bound up with the idea of power: the human being's power over God (the idea Barth had already rejected)--but God's power over the human being as well."<sup>81</sup> Gutierrez's comments interestingly raise the issue of Bonhoeffer's understanding of this relationship between the "notion of religion" and the "idea of power."

Accordingly, this section will briefly examine, first, Karl Barth's critique of religion and its influence in Bonhoeffer's critique, and second, Rudolf Bultmann's anthropology and how he rejected the idea of "God's power over the human being" in a manner that partly resembled Bonhoeffer's.

Having explored what Bonhoeffer meant by religion and his non-religious interpretation, we then move to Bonhoeffer's second anthropological notion in The Letters and Papers from Prison, the "world come of age." Bonhoeffer was able to embrace this modern world which had become more godless and mature precisely because of the grounding that the theologia crucis allowed for such thinking. As Eberhard Bethge expressed:

Now a liberating movement begins to spread in which the Christian listens to Feuerbach and Nietzsche--with a good conscience--and allows them their share in humanity's progress, in that they, for example, warn the Church against becoming a chemist's shop to minister to heavenly needs, leaving the world to its own devices. As against this, the theologia crucis of the Church may serve the inheritance of the Enlightenment as a protection against its own tendency towards the unrealistic. It corrects the unquenchable urge of mankind to glorify, deify or demonize its progress, and, today perhaps even more necessarily in the other direction, protects the rationalist from his unfortunate tendency to the sterile fragmentation of

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<sup>81</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, The Power of the Poor in History. Selected Writings. (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 180.

himself and his work into pessimistic resignation and sceptical agnosticism.<sup>82</sup>

To understand Bonhoeffer's embracing of this modern world by means of the theologia crucis, we shall examine in turn, then, both Nietzsche and Feuerbach, and their atheistic critiques and how they are bound up in the concept of power. Then we shall consider how Bonhoeffer takes up their challenge in the same terms, responding with the theologia crucis. In this way we see clearly how the German pastor was able to affirm simultaneously, and without compromise or contradiction, that which the Enlightenment had bequeathed to the present generation as well as the cross of Jesus Christ. We conclude this section by summarizing how the terms of human autonomy and strength come to their full expression in terms of God's suffering and weakness in the world. In this way, we ultimately show how more of a non-religious language is present in Bonhoeffer's late theology in Letters and Papers from Prison, and how it takes shape in dialectical terms of power and weakness.

#### A. Toward a Non-Religious Interpretation: Bonhoeffer's Concept of Religion

Bonhoeffer's concept of religion is expressed most vividly in the prison letters. Three letters in particular outline his thoughts on the concept:

Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the deus ex machina. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To

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<sup>82</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 773.

that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness...<sup>83</sup>

And in his "Outline for a Book" he said,

Our relation to God is not a 'religious' relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable--that is not authentic transcendence--but our relation to God is a new life in 'existence for others', through participation in the being of Jesus.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge he said,

Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail--in fact it is always the deus ex machina that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure--always, that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries.<sup>85</sup>

Bonhoeffer has in mind a functional understanding of religion, one that describes people's attitudes and concomitant actions under the presumption of a "stop-gap" God. As Clifford Green noted,

. . . Bonhoeffer's concept of religion is not institutional but functional. 'Religion' is not used by Bonhoeffer to refer to such institutional elements as Church, sermon, sacrament, prayer, scripture, doctrine

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<sup>83</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July 1944, p. 361.

<sup>84</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Outline for a Book", Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 381.

<sup>85</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 30 April 1944, p. 282.

and so on, as if these were per se religious. 'Religion' is a particular way of behaving and thinking in an attempt to cope with human weakness and difficulties, and in this behavioral sense it may appropriately be called functional.<sup>86</sup>

Green highlights the fact that "religion" presumes human weakness.<sup>87</sup> In fact, Bonhoeffer defined the religious relationship with God explicitly with reference to two poles: human despair and weakness, and the "supreme Being," absolute in power and goodness.<sup>88</sup> Once again, we see how these paradigmatic terms manifest themselves in a new way in Bonhoeffer's theology, this time with explicit reference to his concept of religion.

With his renunciation of "religiosity" and its attendant weak anthropology, Bonhoeffer went on to affirm a new age, a new period in modern human history characterized by human autonomy

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<sup>86</sup> Clifford Green, "Sociality and Church in Bonhoeffer," Scottish Journal of Theology, p. 432-33.

<sup>87</sup> Although Green's identification of Bonhoeffer's concept of religion as functional is accurate, two additional comments should be made. His description of religion and the tendencies of the religious person house notions of divine deliverance which eclipse, or at least de-emphasize, the place and role of human responsibility. Because such a quietism is connoted within its structure, "functionalism" may not be the most apt characterization for Bonhoeffer's concept of religion.

Secondly, Bonhoeffer's thoughts on religion must always be understood as contextual ones. Rather than offering a universal diagnosis of the "religious person," he addressed his critique to his contemporaries who faced new times, to the modern person standing on the side of history to whom progress had been good--the European descendants of the Enlightenment. This is important to recognize when Bonhoeffer says, "'Religion' is a particular way of behaving and thinking in an attempt to cope with human weakness and difficulties . . . ." The "weakness and difficulties" referred to are those of certain modern persons, those who seek God's power, to rescue them from whatever existential or psychological woe that plagues them "perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think." Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 30 April 1944, p. 282.

<sup>88</sup> For the clearest articulation of these "poles" see Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July 1944, p. 360-61; "Outline for a Book," pp. 380-81; Letter of 23 August 1944, p. 392.

and strength. One of his letters from prison in particular describes at length what he saw in the dawning of this new age.<sup>89</sup> There he said:

The movement that began about the thirteenth century . . . towards the autonomy of man . . . has in our time reached an undoubted completion. Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the 'working hypothesis' called 'God'. In questions of science, art, and ethics this has become an understood thing at which one now hardly dares to tilt. But for the last hundred years or so it has also become increasingly true of religious questions; it is becoming evident that everything gets along without 'God'--and, in fact, just as well as before. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, 'God' is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground . . .

The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian. Pointless, because it seems to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is, in fact, no longer dependent, and thrusting him into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to him. Ignoble, because it amounts to an attempt to exploit man's weakness for purposes that are alien to him and to which he has not freely assented. Unchristian, because it confuses Christ with one particular stage in man's religiousness, i.e. with a human law. . . .<sup>90</sup>

Bonhoeffer was convinced history was entering a new era in which the concept of God would go through far-reaching changes. Such a change would be due primarily to men and women exercising their freedom and autonomy in the world. This "world come of age" would be characterized by persons acting responsibly in the world, discarding the notion of a deus ex machina.

Having characterized religious depictions of God as anachronistic and immature, Bonhoeffer heralded a new period in

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<sup>89</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 8 June 1944, pp. 325-29.

<sup>90</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 8 June 1944, pp. 325-27.



human history characterized by increasing secularity and human autonomy, yielding a "world come of age." It is important to note that in conceiving of this new time in history, he concomitantly spoke of the "non-religious interpretation of theological concepts." In the course of his letters from prison he varied the term he used and also called it "worldly interpretation," "worldly reinterpretation," or "the new non-religious language." In any case, the dynamic at work here was one in which Bonhoeffer attempted to express how we are to understand the world in relation to God. The "non-religious interpretation" is meant primarily to express the relation of God's revelation to the world come of age.<sup>91</sup> The call is for a radically different understanding of the place of God in the world.

More than a program of interpretation, however, his "non-religious interpretation" extends into an ethical category which includes specific concerns for the church.<sup>92</sup> The questions of the "religious" person were no longer the questions of the modern person. A new day had dawned, one that brought with it positive, strong concepts of humanity's place in the world. And it all but seemed to leave God behind in its wake. We turn now to see how Bonhoeffer turned away from an outmoded way of thinking about God in the world to a new one whose very terms were determined on the basis of a new theology. This is done by examining the similarities between Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann for Bonhoeffer's

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<sup>91</sup> Ronald Gregor Smith, ed., World Come of Age: A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (London: Collins, 1967), p. 100.

<sup>92</sup> Although Bonhoeffer saw a transitional period of comparative silence for the Church, there was a more profound rationale behind the call. He saw the emergence of the secular world not as a passing phenomenon, but as a new phase in history that had to develop its own pattern of spirituality. See Paul Ballard, "Worship in a Secular World: Bonhoeffer's Secret Discipline," The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Fall, 1968, p. 35.

understanding of human power and then turning to Bonhoeffer's dialogue with Nietzsche and Feuerbach concerning their respective approaches to human autonomy and divine power.

### 1. Karl Barth's Critique of Religion

The foundational theological influence in Bonhoeffer's critique of religion was certainly Karl Barth. In his prison letter of 8 June 1944 to Eberhard Bethge he praised Barth's clear-sighted critique of religion saying,

Barth was the first to realize the mistake that all these attempts . . . were making in leaving a clear space for religion in the world or against the world. He brought in against religion the God of Jesus Christ, 'pneuma against sarx.' That remains his greatest service. . . .<sup>93</sup>

Indeed, Barth's indictment against religion is rife in his second edition of Romans. There he speaks of religion as the last human possibility. He says,

. . . [w]e are able to see that the last and the most inevitable human possibility--the possibility of religion--even in its most courageous, most powerful, most clearly defined, most impossible 'variety', is after all no more than a human possibility, and as such a limited possibility: and, because limited, peculiarly dangerous, since it bears witness to, and is embraced by, the promise of a new and higher order by which it is itself severely limited.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 8 June 1944, p. 328.

<sup>94</sup> Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, ("Romans II") Sixth edition, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 230.

Religion, as a human possibility, is largely a functional concept describing human behavior. And it has been put to death by Christ's gracious death on the cross. Barth goes on to describe the functional connotation of religion,

Golgotha is the end of law and the frontier of religion. In the slain Christ-according-to-the-law, the last and noblest human possibility, the possibility of human piety and belief and enthusiasm and prayer, is fulfilled by being evacuated . . . With this human body of Christ we also are dead to the law, for we have been removed from that life under the dominion of law, which is death. Looking outwards from the Cross, we observe religion, as a concrete thing of soul and sense, as a particular aspect of human behavior, to have been taken out of the way (Col.ii. 14).<sup>95</sup>

Religion is functionally denoted here as "human piety and belief and enthusiasm and prayer." The religious person "cling[s] to religion with a bourgeois tenacity, supposing it to be the final thing of soul and sense which is deathless and unshattered."<sup>96</sup>

Gutierrez's statement that Barth "had already rejected" the "human being's power over God" is clear.<sup>97</sup> The final delusion is the religious one where a person's righteous or good acts are thought to be good enough to somehow circumvent the purview of God's law. Religion stands up in the face of God's law. Such a view presumes a pocket of power that the human being has over against God. The false picture remains that religion is the one arena left from which the person may exit victorious on one's own merits. Barth, of course, does all he can to illuminate this picture of religion for what it is--a last vestige of human

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<sup>95</sup> Barth, ibid., pp. 233-34. (Emphasis added).

<sup>96</sup> Barth, ibid., p. 238.

<sup>97</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, op. cit., p. 180.

control and domain over against God, denying the fact that all power, all life, all "possibility" rests with God alone. The religious idea of God is just that--an idea, an intellectual fantasy. Barth brings into focus the living, dynamic reality of God, the one in whom all true power rests, in contrast with an idealistic concept of God which is not rooted in reality.<sup>98</sup> Undoubtedly, power is an important motif in Barth's commentary on Romans, and he shows time and time again with whom life and power rest.

Barth's keen perception and critique of what he felt was a misdirected 19th century liberalism, with its idealistic notion of God, left him free to explicate a God grounded in reality. By pointing out the contours of religion in direct opposition to Christian faith, Barth ingeniously demonstrated how anthropology had attempted to pass as theology. He succeeded in pointing out how the human being had falsely "overpowered" God with the notion of religion. The door was left open for piety, no matter how profound, to escape the inevitable judgment of God. The human creature had ultimately found a way to bypass or prevail against God.

Bonhoeffer built on Barth's acute analysis, extending it theologically in his own critique of religion. As Bonhoeffer noted,

Barth, who is the only one to have started along this line of thought, did not carry it to completion,

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<sup>98</sup> As Jüngel put it, "revealed religion distinguishes itself as absolute religion from the preceding forms of religion in that it perceives the necessity of becoming in which the substance becomes self-consciousness . . . God is beheld sensuously and immediately as a self, as a real individual human being. . ." Eberhard Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, trans. by Darrell L. Guder, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., 1983), p. 85.

but arrived at a positivism of revelation, which in the last analysis is essentially a restoration.<sup>99</sup>

And again, in a subsequent letter,

It was not in ethics, as is often said, that he [Barth] subsequently failed . . . it was that in the non-religious interpretation of theological concepts he gave no concrete guidance, either in dogmatics or in ethics. There lies his limitation, and because of it his theology of revelation has become positivist, a 'positivism of revelation', as I put it.<sup>100</sup>

Here we confront Bonhoeffer's accusation against Barth of an Offenbarungspositivismus, or, positivism of revelation, which has been the subject of much controversy over the years among Barth and Bonhoeffer scholars. Supporting Barth's radical critique of religion, Bonhoeffer wanted more, expected more from his thorough-going enterprise. After such a debunking of religion, what could be left but a religion-less Christianity? The path of Barth's critique would lead naturally to specific, concrete descriptions of what a non-religious interpretation of theological concepts would look like, or so Bonhoeffer thought. We saw in Act and Being the nature of his criticism against Barth and how he came up short in his depiction of God's freedom in the world. And now, over a decade later, their differing emphases on the concreteness of God's revelation showed up again. The younger theologian could only conclude that the promising path of Barth's critique dead-ended into a formalistic understanding of revelation, a positivism, ultimately restoring theological

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<sup>99</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 30 April 1944, p. 280.

<sup>100</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., Letter of 8 June 1944, p. 328.

concepts rather than paving the way to fresh, concrete theological insights.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Simon Fisher, in his impressive book, Revelatory Positivism?, examines Bonhoeffer's charge against Barth of Offenbarungspositivismus ultimately deeming it enigmatic in nature and, thus, unsubstantiated. Fisher draws his conclusion by 1) pointing to differing interpretations of Bonhoeffer's accusation among scholars, 2) emphasizing such an accusation as directed more against a trend detected by Bonhoeffer in theology--i.e., the preaching and social witness of the Confessing Church, than against Barth in particular, 3) detecting a disparity between Bonhoeffer's similar accusation against Barth in Act and Being and as it occurred years later in the prison letters, and 4) concluding that such an accusation is related to novel themes which are inchoate and thus problematic. See Simon Fisher, Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 311-314.

We respond to Fisher's assessment by stating that his final evaluation of Bonhoeffer's accusation undercuts itself due to his apologetic agenda. Fisher articulates his response with those in mind who wish to "use the artillery of Bonhoeffer's Offenbarungspositivismus to storm the methodological foundations of the Barthian fortress." (p. 313) However, that is not the desire of this author, nor the intent with which we assess Bonhoeffer's words about his mentor. Seeking a descriptive account of the way Bonhoeffer and Barth differed in the way they discussed the concrete nature of revelation in light of such an accusation, and given the fact that Bonhoeffer chose to identify Barth in such terms constitutes the attitude with which we approach the charge. Although Fisher is right to point out the differing interpretations which have surrounded Bonhoeffer's charge over the years, the fact that such a charge is extended also against the Confessing Church, and the fact that some of his later ideas were not fully developed, Fisher clouds the credibility of the charge by overemphasizing these factors, related though they are. Bonhoeffer did not think Barth went far enough in his critique against religion, that he started something which he did not finish. So, Bonhoeffer took up where Barth left off, trying to determine the concrete parameters of a non-religious Christianity. Bonhoeffer reiterated here his basic disquiet--that with Barth, God's revelation remains a distant, transcendent object of thought, rather than a concrete revelation 'for' the world. The finitum capax infiniti remained the confessional issue to which Bonhoeffer remained loyal and which allowed him to draw out the concrete conclusions he felt were lacking in Barth's critique of religion. The theologians' confessional differences once again separated them from one another. Bonhoeffer's language against Barth in the charge must be weighed with this basic, consistent fact in mind so that one does not end up dismissing the German theologian unduly in light of later related, but ultimately indeterminate factors, as Fisher does.



So, Bonhoeffer took up Barth's critique, asking the questions that he saw naturally issuing forth from such a critique:

What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? How do we speak of God--without religion, i.e., without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on? How do we speak in a 'secular' way about 'God'? In what way are we the ek-klesia, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored, but rather as belonging wholly to the world? In that case, Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world. But what does that mean? What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation? Does the secret discipline . . . take on a new importance here?<sup>102</sup>

Did Bonhoeffer answer these preliminary queries, or was this as far as he got? Not only did he begin to answer these questions, but he left more guidance on the issue than is often credited him. While he defined the religious relationship with God explicitly with reference to the two poles of human weakness and a sovereign, omnipotent God, he discussed the 'non-religious' Christianity with reference to the two poles of human strength and autonomy, and a weak, suffering God. He made this clear in his prison letters, saying the "God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness" would serve as the starting point for the secular interpretation.<sup>103</sup> Whereas he juxtaposed the God of religion (an anachronistic, abstract concept characterized by the Sovereign God in control of human events) with the God of the Bible (the living, incarnate God

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<sup>102</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 280, 281.

<sup>103</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July, 1944, p. 361; "Outline for a Book," p. 381.

characterized by powerlessness and suffering), he further juxtaposed humanity of previous generations (characterized by religious attitudes which formerly depended on an omnipotent God; i.e., the 'religious' person) with a new period in human history (characterized by increasing autonomy and strength, i.e., the 'world come of age' person). In this way, Bonhoeffer showed how a great reversal had been achieved with respect to a modern anthropological self-identity and how it came about it in terms of a fundamental theological revision. Such were the terms in which he cast his critique of religion and discussion of the non-religious interpretation.

## 2. Rudolf Bultmann's Anthropological Notion of Autonomy and Weakness

In discussing Bonhoeffer's departure from Karl Barth we have only looked at one half of the equation. Bonhoeffer was just as uncomfortable with the notion of God's power over persons as well. While he joined Barth's fight against an idealistic God that human beings could exercise power over, it is equally clear that Bultmann's existential anthropology, and its attendant rejection of the "Vermund Gott," the "guardian God," had significant impact on Bonhoeffer's own critique of religion.

We have just seen how Bonhoeffer defined the "religious relationship with God" explicitly with reference to two poles: human despair and weakness, and the "supreme Being, absolute in power and goodness."<sup>104</sup> Bultmann shared Bonhoeffer's negative

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<sup>104</sup> "Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world. . . ." Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July 1944, pp. 360-61; "Outline for a Book," pp. 380-381; Letter of 21 August 1944, p. 392.

view of an omnipotent God who exploits power over a weak humanity. For him, God as a Supreme Being was a false concept,<sup>105</sup> as well as the notion of a weak humanity at the mercy of a despotic God. To the contrary, both men assiduously affirmed an autonomous, "strong" view of humanity.<sup>106</sup> Johnson observes that Bultmann's affirmation of the autonomy of human existence is primarily an existential (Heideggerian), ontological statement, rather than a theological one. He says,

. . . this affirmation of human existence is set on the Dasein-Welt axis of Heidegger's ontology: that is, it is the autonomy of persons coram mundo that comes here to expression, the liberation of one from the falsification of his own being in the modality of an alien worldly being. It is not the autonomy of humanity coram Deo which, theologically, is hybris, sin, and which would require a quite different theological response.<sup>107</sup>

Bultmann and Bonhoeffer were like-minded revisionists, working fundamentally from the thematic presupposition of

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<sup>105</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Modernity and Faith in Conflict", Rudolf Bultmann. Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era, ed. Roger Johnson, (London: Collins, 1987), p. 261.

<sup>106</sup> Roger Johnson has cogently demonstrated points of similarity between Bultmann's critique of mythology and Bonhoeffer's critique of religion. He identifies two themes basic to Bultmann's critique--the autonomy of the world and the autonomy of human existence--and argues they reappear in somewhat modified form in Bonhoeffer's critique of religion. See Roger Johnson, "Religious Mythology and a Secular Faith: The Weakness of Man and the Weakness of God," (unpublished paper on file at the Bonhoeffer Archives, Union Theological Seminary). Bultmann's view of persons' autonomous existence in the world is perhaps most clearly seen in his 1941 essay, "New Testament and Mythology." See Rudolf Bultmann, New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings, trans. by Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

<sup>107</sup> Johnson, op. cit., p. 14.

worldly/human autonomy.<sup>108</sup> Although Bultmann charted the beginning of a new historical era with the Enlightenment and Bonhoeffer dated it much earlier (in the thirteenth century), both agreed history has been moving toward autonomy.

While autonomy figures into both theologian's historico-anthropological visions, weakness, as a thematic, is equally ingredient to these purviews. The way each man deals with this "flip-side" to human autonomy markedly distinguishes them from one another.

Bultmann's existentialism is recognized as a landmark in early twentieth century German theology, its influence still reverberating throughout the Western theological enterprise.<sup>109</sup> His unique blend of Heideggerian existentialist philosophy with the older philosophical-theological tradition of Marburg neo-Kantianism<sup>110</sup> eventually came to distinguish him from the "dia-

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<sup>108</sup> Bonhoeffer emphasizes the same Enlightenment motifs as had Bultmann: the "sufficiency of reason" and "the discovery of the laws by which the world lives and manages." See Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July 1944, pp. 359-61.

<sup>109</sup> The Scottish theologian Ronald Gregor Smith did much to clarify the relationship between Bonhoeffer and Bultmann particularly because he was anxious to let Bonhoeffer "go his own way" and not be pressed into either the Barthian or Bultmannian camp. This notwithstanding, Smith placed Bonhoeffer closer to Bultmann, finally and regretfully suggesting Bonhoeffer's final position one of "regretful non-Barthianism". See Keith W. Clements, The Theology of Ronald Gregor Smith, (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1986), p. 170. See esp. pp. 186-197.

<sup>110</sup> Bultmann, along with Natorp and Cohen held to the neo-Kantian theory of knowledge which proposes that knowing involves objectifying in accordance with the principle of law. The neo-Kantians moved beyond Kant in understanding reason as both beginning and ending with itself. Whereas they rejected the notion of Objekt, the initially given referent of thought, they accept it now as the product of thought. Cf. Johnson, The Origins of Demythologizing. Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), pp. 47, 50.

lectual theologians"--Barth, Gogarten and Grisebach. Bultmann's existential interpretation of Scripture is still taught today as a viable hermeneutic paradigm.

It is important to understand exactly what he meant by existentialism.<sup>111</sup> Bultmann believed anxiety, insecurity, or fear for one's future is the basic anthropological existential situation.<sup>112</sup> For him, human weakness--one's insecurity and anxiety--provides the continuing point of contact between the Gospel and persons. The crucial issue for faith lies in clarifying the various resolutions to a person's situation of

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<sup>111</sup> For our purposes, the distinction between "existential event" and "existentialist conceptuality" is critical. Roger Johnson, in his highly instructive introduction to his anthology on Bultmann, denotes the distinction in the following manner, "Bultmann uses the word "existential" (in German, existentiell) to refer to an individual human being as responsible for his or her own future. What is existential is personal and expressed in an individual's self-understanding. By self-understanding, Bultmann refers to the ways in which each of us comes to terms with anxious concerns for his or her future. . . . In contrast, existentialist (in German, existential) refers to a systematic body of philosophical concepts and a method of understanding human existence. Hence, existentialist is most often linked with "conceptuality." See Roger Johnson, Rudolf Bultmann. Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era, (London: Collins Publishers, 1987), p. 22. (Emphasis added). The 1925 essay "The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament" is illustrative of Bultmann's "existential" connotation, whereas his 1950 essay, "The Problem of Hermeneutics" is representative of his "existentialist conceptuality." See Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament" (1925) reprinted in James M. Robinson, ed., The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology, (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968); Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics", (1950) reprinted in Johnson, op. cit., pp. 137-57. I will be dealing exclusively with the former of the two aspects of Bultmann's existentialism.

<sup>112</sup> Bultmann expresses this anthropological concern within the context of mythology. For Bultmann, "mythology is rooted in, and an expression of, man's [sic] situation of weakness in the world. Indeed, he consistently defines mythology as expressing this particular self-understanding: man's [sic] situation of insecurity in a cosmic reality which always exceeds the grasp of his knowledge and control. See Rudolf Bultmann, "Demythologizing: Controversial Slogan and Theological Focus," reprinted in Johnson, op. cit., pp. 293, 296-298, 302-304; Rudolf Bultmann, Faith and Understanding, (trans. Louise P. Smith) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 46.

insecurity.<sup>113</sup> Or, worded differently, for Bultmann, faith depends on which self-understanding one adopts at the point of existential insecurity.

Like Bultmann, Bonhoeffer took up the theme of weakness, but expressed it in much different terms. As shown above, Bultmann believed the basic anthropological existential situation one of insecurity and anxiety for the future--a position of weakness. Bonhoeffer did not accept this anthropological thesis. He did not simply question which resolution to the problem of weakness is the right one, but questioned the status and legitimacy of one's existential weakness as a guide to the truth of one's humanity.<sup>114</sup>

Johnson demonstrates how Bonhoeffer critiques Bultmann for his arbitrary use of weakness as a foundational element in his anthropological system. Bonhoeffer does this by describing the paradigmatic "religious" relationship with God: namely, one's weakness--one's insecurity, anxiety, dependency, helplessness, guilt--and God's absolute power and goodness.<sup>115</sup> These are prominent terms of "religion" for Bonhoeffer, hence, his rejection of Bultmann's anthropological self-understanding (the existentially weak self) as a construct of religion.

Johnson is right in assessing Bonhoeffer's disapproval of Bultmann's anthropological notion of weakness based on the terms of his religious critique. He said,

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<sup>113</sup> Johnson, "Religious Mythology and a Secular Faith," op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>114</sup> See Johnson, ibid., p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> Johnson, ibid., p. 24.



The theme of the weakness of God becomes the lynchpin for the development of his non-religious interpretation of biblical conceptuality . . . [that] at this point . . . Bonhoeffer discerns the connection between the autonomy of secular existence and the revelation of God in Christ. . . .<sup>116</sup>

Bonhoeffer strongly opposed nineteenth-century liberal theology's strategy of focusing on the limits of human autonomy. It could only lead to guilt and despair. Such a religious attack upon the adulthood of the world (muendigkeit) aims:

to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is, in fact, no longer dependent, and thrusting him into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to him.<sup>117</sup>

Johnson is correct, further, in stating that the weakness of God displaces the focus from the weakness of self.<sup>118</sup> However, he comes up short in his positive treatment of Bonhoeffer's thematic use of weakness precisely at this point.

Johnson suggests Bonhoeffer made a sharp turn away from the Bultmannian anthropological theme of human weakness as the point of departure for faith, replacing it with the theme of the weakness of God. Weakness, thus, became the cornerstone thematic for theology, eclipsing anthropology as its locus.<sup>119</sup> Johnson

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<sup>116</sup> Johnson, "Religious Mythology and a Secular Faith", op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>117</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 8 June 1944, p. 327.

<sup>118</sup> Johnson, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>119</sup> One might think it an overstatement to suggest Johnson's theological use of "weakness" eclipsing anthropology categorically. Indeed, he speaks of the "relationship of 'correspondence' between secular autonomy and Christian faith." Johnson, op. cit., p. 28. However, he has held up the Bultmannian existential self-understanding of weakness, suggesting it be completely replaced

seemed to suggest that Bonhoeffer articulated the notion of God's weakness once he recognized and articulated the "world come of age" motif. According to him, only when Bonhoeffer spoke of the adulthood of the world did he then go on to make the connection or "correlation" between a strong view of humanity and a weak view of God.<sup>120</sup> But Johnson's analysis overlooks the very important fact that Bonhoeffer's theology from his early to his late works increasingly came to incorporate the theme of weakness into its foundation. As Eberhard Bethge noted, the power of weakness was a basic insight Bonhoeffer held on to throughout his life.<sup>121</sup>

In fact, it is more accurate to see the "weak God" motif as the culmination of a lifelong theological thematic. I have already shown the chronological progression of Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis in chapter one, charting the ever expanding dialectical theme of power and weakness in his life and theology. Johnson has ended up presenting an incomplete picture of the way "weakness" as a theme took hold in Bonhoeffer as a theological motif. Having not acknowledged the relevance of this developing

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by a theological notion of power, according to Bonhoeffer. He has failed to remind the reader that he is speaking of a rejection of anthropology as weakness in the existential, psychological sense only. As is well known, Bonhoeffer extolled the value of coming to view the events of world history "from below." Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, "After Ten Years", p. 17. Johnson unknowingly is underestimating the breadth of Bonhoeffer's use of "weakness" in his theology as well as his anthropology.

<sup>120</sup> For example, Johnson says, "Indeed, Bonhoeffer's purpose is to come upon a method of biblical interpretation that is appropriate to the full expression of the life of the Church in a religionless age . . ." Johnson, "Religious Mythology and a Secular Faith", op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>121</sup> Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Man of Vision, Man of Courage, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 374.

thematic in Bonhoeffer, he unintentionally exaggerated the 'correlative' nature of the relationship between a secular autonomy and Christian faith, underestimating the weak God as the basis for an autonomous humanity.

By holding up the weakness of God as the basis (not correlation) for Bonhoeffer's statements on autonomy and the world come of age, we reverse the order which is normally suggested as to the factors which led him to the axiomatic Christological query--Who is Jesus Christ for us in a world come of age? Whereas many, like Johnson, discuss the weak God as a response to the question, I believe it is the basis by which he formulates the question. We should not forget Bonhoeffer's words on this,

Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the deus ex machina. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This probably will be the starting-point for our 'secular interpretation.'<sup>122</sup>

So, how might one characterize what Bonhoeffer has done with the theme of "weakness"? On the one hand, it has been removed as a psychological category (at least in the Bultmannian, existentialist sense of dependence, guilt, and anxiety) and replaced as a theological category, looking to the weakness of God as its new locus. This much Johnson brought us in his

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<sup>122</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 18 July 1944, p. 361 (Emphasis added).

revision of Bultmann's mythology according to Bonhoeffer. But there is more to this theme of weakness.

One must not forget the "movement" of Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross. We have concurred with Johnson's analysis of the reversal of terms which occurred. Weakness became a category descriptive not of humanity, as religion would have it, but of God. Power and autonomy shifted from God to women and men in a world come of age. The terms of religion were effectively reversed, thus capturing the true relationship between God and persons. This represents the first step in Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis. Bonhoeffer did more than release persons from a "tyranny of weakness" however,<sup>123</sup> he was reinstating another kind of weakness. In other words, Bonhoeffer went on to advocate weakness in a totally new and foreign way, the second level of a theologia crucis which involves a redefinition at its base. Johnson is only able to see Bonhoeffer's project as a release from a "tyranny of weakness" because of the vectorial nature of his analysis. For him, a strong, autonomous view of humanity which has shed any parasitic, sick self-image as well as any dominating, despotic image of God, co-exists with a God characterized by weakness. He fails to elaborate on this weakness of God once he has finally hit upon it, and how it informs the modern person, the world come of age.

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<sup>123</sup> "Man's changed situation is such that he is increasingly able to cope technologically with the weakness of his situation in the world and psychologically with the weakness of his self-revelation as conscience. As a result, the old religious theme of individual salvation has little appeal to him. He is far too occupied with the reorganization of his present society for a better distribution of human security and the freedom from the tyranny of weakness to indulge in such an individualistic religious preoccupation." Johnson, op. cit., p. 20. (Emphasis added).

The problem here is that divine weakness, as a motif, is discussed by Johnson only in relation to Bonhoeffer's thoughts on worldly autonomy in the Letters and Papers from Prison. He does not read back, for example, into the Ethics or The Cost of Discipleship, to get a more complete picture of what Bonhoeffer might have intended with this concept of a weak and powerless God who has been pushed to the edge of human awareness.

If one does not recognize and articulate the comprehensive nature of Bonhoeffer's theological notion of weakness, then other key statements are bypassed, which typically are not viewed in relation to his later thoughts on divine weakness. If one is aware of the developmental thematic of weakness, then notions, in this case, anthropological strength or autonomy, are much more fully informed.

Bonhoeffer, then, reverses the terms of Christian anthropology, as is seen in his treatment of Bultmann's existential-anthropological understanding of weakness. But he does not simply release the terms of anthropology from the "tyranny of weakness." Once released, they regain their meaning according to the hidden, "renewed" theological meaning accorded to autonomy as is evidenced throughout Bonhoeffer's works, particularly his Ethics. It is not enough to say that the reversal of religious terms occurred. The weakness of God inscribes human autonomy more fully than a mere exchange will allow, thus, imbuing the anthropological reality with more power than one would think at first glance.

The way Bonhoeffer rejected Bultmann's anthropological starting point is a perfect example of his revisionism. Both men were forwarding ontological statements. For Bonhoeffer the ontological structure of the person is not rooted in self-

relatedness, as it was in Bultmann, but in the self-other relationship.<sup>124</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer replaced the individualism of Bultmann's existentialism with the sociality of a pro me/pro nobis structured Christology.<sup>125</sup>

B. Toward a World Come of Age: the Atheistic Critique and the Nature of Human Autonomy

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, the Will to Power, and a Transvaluation of Values

We turn now to examine two philosophical influences in Bonhoeffer's theology, with an eye toward the way in which power figures in as an important concept for both: Friedrich Nietzsche

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<sup>124</sup> Clifford Green, "Sociality and Church in Bonhoeffer's 1933 Christology," The Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 21, No. 4 (December 1968), p. 427. Green convincingly argues that the pro me nature of Christ's existence for humanity is the key toward recognizing and understanding the fundamentally social nature of human existence.

<sup>125</sup> Bonhoeffer further affirmed the corporeality of human existence, a feature missing from Bultmann's existential anthropology. As Green said, "[With Bonhoeffer] man's nature as his corporeality is not denied or ignored but affirmed within his historical being. Contrast Bultmann, whose existential interpretation of the Pauline 'soma' yields man as an historical existent but not 'essentially' embodied in nature; he notes that 'soma' also has this meaning in Paul, but it is filtered out by the hermeneutic. Green, "Sociality and Church in Bonhoeffer's 1933 Christology," ibid., p. 429; Clifford Green, Theology of the New Testament, I, (New York: Scribner, 1951), pp. 192ff.

A strong parallel between Bonhoeffer and Michel Foucault also exists on this topic of the corporeality of human existence. Foucault's 1976 work refers ". . . not so much to carnal knowledge as to knowledge of--and therefore a power over--bodies . . ." The 'Will to Knowledge' as the original French title is called has to do with sexuality when one remembers the connection between the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge. See Michel Foucault, La Volonté de savoir retitled in English as The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction, trans. by Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Alan Sheridan, Michel Foucault. The Will to Truth, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1980), p. 165. With both men, the human body was taken seriously as a legitimate theological category (Bonhoeffer) and political category (Foucault and Bonhoeffer).



and Wilhelm Feuerbach. There is no doubt that Bonhoeffer was well-versed in the anti-rationalistic "philosophy of life" in his early student days. He was thoroughly familiar with Nietzsche<sup>126</sup> and Feuerbach's critique of religion, critically dialoguing with each one in his Letters and Papers from Prison.<sup>127</sup>

Power is at the heart of Nietzsche's philosophical system, as well as his critique of Christian religion. The "will-to-power" is instantly recognizable as leitmotif, describing "the need for persons to assert power over their own life and to combat those powers which would rob them of their autonomy."<sup>128</sup> Nietzsche understood Christianity's moral ethics to be a noxious one, characterized by self-denial, piety and other self-defeating

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<sup>126</sup> "Bonhoeffer read all of Nietzsche very carefully, and Nietzsche's tremendous plea for the earth and for loyalty to its creatures never left his mind." Eberhard Bethge, "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology," in World Come of Age: A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (Ronald Gregor Smith, ed.) (London: Collins, 1967), p. 27.

<sup>127</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly's article, "Bonhoeffer's "Non-Religious" Christianity" discusses at length Nietzsche's and Feuerbach's influence on Bonhoeffer. See Geoffrey Kelly, "Bonhoeffer's 'Non-Religious' Christianity: Antecedents and Critique," Bijdragen 37, (1976), pp. 118-148.

As Kelly has noted, "André Dumas observes correctly that, whereas Bonhoeffer replies formally to Nietzsche in the prison letters, his theology there is substantially an answer to Feuerbach. This is especially true when seen in the context of Bonhoeffer's attack on religion where he carried Barth's vitriolic criticism of religion a radical step further. Both Barth and Bonhoeffer were reacting against 'religion' in the pejorative sense given it by Feuerbach, namely, that religion was a mere projection of man." Kelly, ibid., p. 125; cf. André Dumas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality, (London: SCM Press Limited, 1971), p. 286. I would agree with Kelly and Dumas' analysis in terms of the Feuerbachian motif of religion as a human projection as an important, substantial influence on Bonhoeffer. However, Kelly is suggesting that Bonhoeffer's late theology in general follows suit. As my argument will show, from the perspective of power analysis, Bonhoeffer dialogues substantially with both philosophers, not simply Feuerbach.

<sup>128</sup> Kelly, "Bonhoeffer's Non-Religious Christianity: Antecedents and Critique," op. cit., p. 119. Schopenhauer's notion of life as essentially "will" undergirds Nietzsche's concept.

traits and behavior. He believed "resentment" was a concept which lay at the heart of ideas like justice, equality, democracy, and religion. It is how the masses work against the ruling classes, how the weak exploit the power of the strong. By stressing such values as guilt, worthlessness, humility and self-denial, Nietzsche saw Christianity trying to co-opt the positive, strong values of an autonomous people with morally bankrupt, even corrupt, ones instead.

Partly in reaction to this negative code of morals and ethics, Nietzsche spoke of a "transvaluation of all values," or a replacing of all traditional, self-deprecatory values with positive, life-affirming ones. He did this specifically by rejecting the Christian concept of God with his atheistic notion of the Übermensch, or superior man. Nietzsche had come to believe that Christianity was a religion of slaves, belittling the human being in an effort to magnify the divine image of "God." He said,

The Christian conception of God--God as god of the sick, God as a spider, God as spirit--is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attained on earth. It may even represent the low-water mark in the descending development of divine types. God degenerated into the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes! God as the declaration of war against life, against nature, against the will to live! God--the formula for every slander against 'this world', for every lie about the 'beyond'!"<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Antichrist reprinted in The Portable Nietzsche, trans. by W. Kaufmann, (New York: Viking Library, 1966), p. 585 quoted in Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Bonhoeffer's Non-Religious Christianity: Antecedents and Critique", op. cit., p. 121.

We see this notion of a "weak" humanity and a powerful God come to a head in Nietzsche's concept of love. He believed the Christian concept of love to be identified with a sentimentalized love, or, the exploitation of the strong by the weak.<sup>130</sup> Bonhoeffer saw more to be praised in Nietzsche's atheistic critique, indeed, more to be in line with true Christian love, than otherwise. He said,

Nietzsche, without knowing it, was speaking in the spirit of the New Testament when he attacked the legalistic and philistine misinterpretation of the commandment which bids us love our neighbour. He wrote: 'You are assiduous in your attentions to your neighbour and you find beautiful words to describe your assiduity. But I tell you that your love for your neighbour is a worthless love for yourselves. You go to your neighbour to seek refuge from yourselves and then you try to make a virtue of it; but I see through your 'unselfishness' . . . Do I advise you to love your neighbour? I advise you rather to shun your neighbour and to love whoever is furthest from you!'"<sup>131</sup>

While Nietzsche rejected the "Christian" concept of love of one's neighbor as a disguised form of self-love, Bonhoeffer seized upon the philosopher's critique, offering a redefinition of neighbor in terms of its opposite. The enemy becomes the neighbor in true Christian love--there is no distinction so that the person may not get lost in determining "Who is my neighbor?" or "Who is my enemy?", and thus evade the Christian call to love. As Bonhoeffer put it in responding to Nietzsche's critique:

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Kelly, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>131</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 259. For more on Nietzsche's concept of love of neighbor, see Friedrich Nietzsche, "Neighbor-Love" in Thus Spake Zarathustra, reprinted in The Portable Nietzsche, trans. by W. Kaufmann, (New York: Viking Library, 1966).

Beyond the neighbour who is committed to us by the call of Jesus there stands also for Jesus the one who is furthest from us, namely, Jesus Christ Himself, God Himself. If beyond his neighbour a man does not know this one who is furthest from him, and if he does not know this one who is furthest from him as this neighbour, then he does not serve his neighbour but himself; he takes refuge from the free open space of responsibility in the comforting confinement of the fulfilment of duty.<sup>132</sup>

For Nietzsche, Christianity had digressed to a point where humanity was reduced to a place of self-abnegation, powerlessness and no value so that it could be rescued by an omnipotent, strong God who stood over against it. The Übermensch and "transvaluation of all values" represent the atheist philosopher's attempt to affirm all that is strong, healthy, autonomous and full of life, in persons and on the earth, rather than to exploit it in the name of a corrupt religion which pulls itself up with a false image of divinity.

Certainly Bonhoeffer drew substantially from Nietzsche's critique of such "life-affirming" notions. Any casuistic morality or ethics was just as repugnant to the German pastor as it was to the philosopher. This influence is evident in several parts of the Letters and Papers from Prison as well as in his earlier theology.<sup>133</sup> Even as a young doctoral student, Bonhoeffer articulated the need for the Christian and Christian

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<sup>132</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 259.

<sup>133</sup> Reference here is being made to the earthbound nature of Bonhoeffer's ethics as early as 1929 as is seen in his lecture "Grundfragen einer christlichen Ethik." See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Grundfragen einer christlichen Ethik," Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. III, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1960), pp. 48-58; see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, pp. 39-48.

ethics to remain earthbound. This is evident in his recounting of the tale of Antaeus, the giant.

The profound old saga tells of the giant Antaeus, who was stronger than any man on earth; no one could overcome him until once in a fight someone lifted him from the ground; then the giant lost all the strength which had flowed into him through his contact with the earth. The man who would leave the earth, who would depart from the present distress, loses the power which still holds him by eternal, mysterious forces.<sup>134</sup>

The literal notion of the ground underneath you as the force which gives you power and strength was one which was theologically present in Bonhoeffer's theology from beginning to end. The significance of the earthly, human community is expressed in terms of the Christian community as Christ's locus of power in the early theological period (Sanctorum Communio, Act and Being and Christology),<sup>135</sup> in his focused work on disciplined Christian community, Life Together as well as The Cost of Discipleship, and in the broader concept of human community in his later works Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison.<sup>136</sup>

So, in both Nietzsche and Bonhoeffer we have an affirmation of life, the goodness of the earth and the autonomy of the

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<sup>134</sup> Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, p. 47.

<sup>135</sup> "Christ existing as community" is the specific motif expressing this socially-grounded concept.

<sup>136</sup> Christ as "the man for others" is the specific concept expressing this broader, socially-structured reality, although it should be noted that Bonhoeffer's concept of Christian action miteinander and füreinander, articulated as early as 1927 in Sanctorum Communio, is present throughout his theology, indicating the broad social base from which his Christology developed. Susanne Dress, Bonhoeffer's younger sister, observed that the "ground" under one's feet was the Christian community. Cf. Susanne Dress, "Remarks on the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," trans. by Reginald and Ilse Fuller, Union Seminary Quarterly Review, Vol. 25.2 (Winter 1970), pp. 134-35.

person. Bonhoeffer agreed that human strength, earthly life and autonomy were not to be shunned or belittled, but affirmed. In this respect Bonhoeffer took up Nietzsche's challenge to affirm the concrete goodness of the earth, indeed, validating the earth as a source of strength or power for the person. This is the aspect of Nietzsche that Bonhoeffer learned from and utilized in setting out his thoughts on the world come of age and the non-religious Christianity. But herein is where Bonhoeffer goes beyond Nietzsche in setting out the nature of concrete reality, and specifically, the nature of human power, strength, vitality, and autonomy.

The fact that Bonhoeffer came to speak more and more emphatically of God in terms of weakness and powerlessness would seem to contradict such a healthy image of humanity and the world. But Bonhoeffer's life-affirming, world-affirming thoughts are grounded, indeed, defined by his profound theological understanding of God's weakness in the world. For it is not that Bonhoeffer merely "absorb[ed] Nietzsche's protest into his own Christian ethic"<sup>137</sup> but he accepted Nietzsche's challenge, redefining the terms for divine and human power by making the cross his starting point for all language concerning God and humanity; hence, the non-religious understanding of Christianity and it's inherent image of autonomous persons.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> As James Woelfel has asserted, implying an uncritical posture toward Nietzsche. See James W. Woelfel, Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), pp. 443-46.

<sup>138</sup> Peter H. Van Ness, in his article "Bonhoeffer, Nietzsche, and Secular Spirituality" (Encounter, Autumn, 1991, pp. 327-341; esp. pp. 337, 338) concluded that Bonhoeffer's prison context did much to move him closer to Nietzsche than was true of Barth, resulting in a religionless or secular spirituality such as was championed by the philosopher. Whereas we agree that Bonhoeffer entered into a more profound discussion with Nietzsche than did



Whereas it would be very easy to see both Bonhoeffer and Nietzsche's love of the earth and affirmation of life and conclude that the former's thoughts on the subject are largely due to the influence of the latter, a closer inspection of the development of Bonhoeffer's theology, particularly the motif of the power of God's weakness indicates that a theological motivation lies at the heart of his positive statements on human autonomy, the goodness of the world, freedom, etc. For, in talking about the God before whom persons should live, Bonhoeffer replies firmly against a peripheral God, located at the outskirts of life, yet equally against the concept of a God who intrudes on persons' autonomy and rearranges the laws of nature.<sup>139</sup> Bonhoeffer said he has "come to be doubtful of talking about human boundaries. . . . It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously in this way to reserve some space for God; I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre, not in weakness but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and goodness."<sup>140</sup> Indeed, as early as 1931, in his essay, "Concerning the Christian Idea of God" Bonhoeffer wrote,

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Barth (with his critique of religion) as he tried to hammer out his thoughts on a religionless Christianity, Van Ness did not take into account our main point--that the cross of Jesus Christ was the starting point for Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation as well as for his image of a world come of age. In this way, Van Ness has drawn too close a connection between Nietzsche and Bonhoeffer.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Revelation in Christ. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses, L, Fasc. 1 (May 1974), p. 60.

<sup>140</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 30 April 1944, p. 282.

God entered history in Jesus, and so entirely that he can be recognized in his hiddenness only by faith. God gives an amazing proof of his sole authority in the cross of Christ. God himself dies and reveals himself in the death of a man, who is condemned as a sinner. It is precisely this, which is the foolishness of the Christian idea of God, which has been witnessed to by all genuine Christian thinking from Paul, Augustine, Luther, to Kierkegaard and Barth . . . God remains in His hiddenness. In Christ all men are either condemned or restored and it is the work of God, the Holy Spirit, to apply this general condition in which all men are, to the single person . . . Here the paradoxical essence of God becomes visible to the faith of the Christian believer. Justification is pure self-revelation, pure way of God to man. No religion, no ethics, no metaphysical knowledge may serve man to approach God. These are all subject to the judgment of God, they are works of man. Only the acknowledgment that God's word alone helps and that every other attempt is and remains sinful, only by this acknowledgment God is received. And this acknowledgment must be given by God, as the Holy Spirit, as faith. That is the foolishness of the revelation of God and its paradoxical character--that just there, where the power of man has lapsed entirely, where man knows his own weakness, sinfulness, and consequently the judgment of God upon him, that just there God is already working in grace, that just and exactly there and only there is forgiveness, justification, restoration . . . The justification of the sinner--this is the self-proof of the sole authority of God.<sup>141</sup>

Hence, as Kelly notes, "Luther's theologia crucis serves, likewise, as the basis for Bonhoeffer's proposed reform of theological discourse and for an explanation of how God chooses to affirm the world and exert his salvific power in that world."<sup>142</sup>

Of particular interest to us is the fact that through his theologia crucis God's omnipotence is grounded in the cross, in

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<sup>141</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Concerning the Christian Idea of God. 1931," Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Gesammelte Schriften, Dritter Band, Hrsg. Eberhard Bethge, (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1960), pp. 108-09.

<sup>142</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Revelation in Christ. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," op. cit., p. 64.

suffering, weakness and dying,<sup>143</sup> while human strength and power is grounded in the Christological notion of "being there for the other," marked by selfless action and love.<sup>144</sup> This is the point at which we see Bonhoeffer meeting Nietzsche's challenge head on.

While history has progressed to a point where philosophers like Nietzsche do away with the false conception of God as the deus ex machina, Bonhoeffer praises such development because it forces Christians and non-Christians alike to face up to the fact that God's power is manifest in weakness--in the suffering death of Jesus on the cross. That is the concrete, earthly image of divine power which quashes any metaphysical fiction. As Bethge has put it,

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<sup>143</sup> The fact that divine omnipotence is grounded in the cross, in weakness is clear from Bonhoeffer's "Outline for a Book" See Bonhoeffer, "Outline for a Book," Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 381. There he said, "Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world . . . [h]is [Christ's] 'being there for others' is the experience of transcendence. It is only this 'being there for others', maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence."

<sup>144</sup> The fact that Bonhoeffer grounds all anthropological statements, whether with reference to the Christian community or to non-believers as well, in the notion of God's weakness and powerlessness in the world is evident in his following words, noted earlier, from prison: "The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us, and helps us . . . Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: god is the deus ex machina. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; . . . To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting point for our 'secular interpretation.'" Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letter of 16 July 1944, pp. 360-61. (Emphasis added).

Bonhoeffer wants to re-check the doctrinal shape of the churches in order to prove that Christ is precisely not all that religion says he is. He is the man for others against individualistic inwardness. He is lonely and forsaken without transcendent escape. He worships not in provinciality but in the midst of real life. He, though longing for him, does not experience the deus ex machina. Thus the time for religion must have gone, but not the time for Jesus, or if you like, for the theologia crucis.<sup>145</sup>

Bonhoeffer is not content to assign positive value to categories such as human autonomy, freedom and power in themselves as Nietzsche does, but he defines such terms only with reference to God's weakness. Paul Ricoeur has suggested that the paradoxical joining of the concept of a suffering God to the experience of life's fullness is an answer to Nietzsche.<sup>146</sup> We would add that rather than a paradoxical wedding of concepts (weak God, powerful humanity), Bonhoeffer was redefining divine and human power according to his theologia crucis<sup>147</sup> and the

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<sup>145</sup> Bethge, "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology," op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>146</sup> See Kelly, op. cit., p. 56, footnote 56.

<sup>147</sup> I fully concur with Kelly, that "Luther's theologia crucis serves . . . as the basis for Bonhoeffer's proposed reform of theological discourse and for an explanation of how God chooses to affirm the world and exert his salvific power in that world." Kelly, without drawing explicit attention to it, also hit upon the redefinition taking place in Bonhoeffer's cross-centered understanding of power when he said, "The divine quality which most fascinated Bonhoeffer as he grappled with the implications of worldliness for Christianity was, therefore, God's paradoxical 'power in weakness'. This 'weakness' was a very human way of describing God's willingness to respect man's autonomy, to allow himself to be 'pushed out of the world' (not to dominate as an all-powerful ruler) onto the cross (but to be personally related as a loving and redeeming God), to assume man's sufferings as his own, and finally, to forgive and console. At the same time, this is a mode of God's power, since in this way life, in the fullness intended by God's creative-redemptive acts, is affirmed and man is more effectively brought to a genuine self-transcendence." Kelly, "Revelation in Christ. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," op. cit., pp. 64-65.

power of weakness.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, the redefinition extends beyond a theological reordering of concepts. It is more radical than that, as we shall see.

## 2. Ludwig Feuerbach's Concept of Reality and Anthropological Weakness

Feuerbach represents another important influence on Bonhoeffer. As is well known, Feuerbach was convinced that theology is nothing more than a misguided anthropology, where persons project themselves as God, adorning God with all the attributes they lack.<sup>149</sup> He saw the Christian religion as an exercise in debilitating persons of all that is healthy, mature and life-affirming, displacing these normal human traits with whimsical notions of a divine despot. Like Nietzsche, he saw Christianity as corrupting humanity, leaving it the victim of a vampire-like God-concept whose power is gained at the expense of its human victims, drained of strength, life, and power.

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<sup>148</sup> Geoffrey Kelly speaks of God's paradoxical "power in weakness." I am suggesting, however, that Bonhoeffer speaks of the "power of weakness." Such a seemingly minor distinction is telling in that Kelly's choice of words stresses the paradox involved in the hiddenness of God's power. It seems to me, however, that Bonhoeffer, as part of his theology of the cross, is redefining divine and human power in terms of faith's hiddenness. Whereas one connotation stresses the polarity and tension between the two concepts (of power and weakness), the other focuses on the unity between the two terms. I am arguing that Bonhoeffer believed in the power of weakness and, by trying to articulate such a concept, he could quite easily discuss human autonomy and divine weakness at the same time. Both terms are to be reexamined in terms of their hidden character. All this points to his christological ontology and the hidden nature of reality as articulated in the Letters and Papers from Prison.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Henry Mottu, "Feuerbach and Bonhoeffer: Criticism of Religion and the Last Period of Bonhoeffer's Thought," trans. by David Lewis, Union Seminary Quarterly Review, Vol. XXV, No. 1, (Fall 1969), p. 5.



Bonhoeffer met Feuerbach's critique of religion by challenging the latter's concept of reality. The philosopher believed religion understood reality as duplex in nature, the heavenly and the earthly, in which the person is ". . . parcelled out between a heavenly and an earthly lord . . ."<sup>150</sup> But Bonhoeffer, especially in his Ethics, did not speak in terms of a divine reality and a human one. Rather, he interpreted reality christologically, suggesting Christ alone as the "real One" (der Wirkliche), and reality as having a hidden character, a hidden name, Jesus Christ.<sup>151</sup> The structure of reality, including secularity, is held together by Jesus Christ. Hence, his emphasis on Christ as Mediator (der Mittler) rather than transcendent Redeemer.<sup>152</sup> Bonhoeffer gets to the heart of Feuerbach's critique of religion by asserting an ontologically unified understanding of reality, thwarting Feuerbach's presumption of Christianity's view toward the nature of reality.

Bonhoeffer went on to invert the philosopher's critique at yet another point. Feuerbach believed that "[t]o enrich God, man

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<sup>150</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, Necessity for a Reform in Philosophy (1842) quoted in Mottu, "Feuerbach and Bonhoeffer" op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>151</sup> "What Christ does is precisely to give effect to reality. He affirms reality. And indeed He is Himself the real man and consequently the foundation of all human reality." Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 85. Further, Bonhoeffer stated that, "[t]he point of departure for Christian ethics is not the reality of one's own self, or the reality of the world; nor is it the reality of standards and values. It is the reality of God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ." Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 189-90.

<sup>152</sup> "He [Bonhoeffer] was now able to say that Jesus Christ is for me, for us, present in word, sacrament, and community as one who is historical, manifesting himself through that presence as the center of existence, history, and nature, and as mediator, who stands in our place." Bonhoeffer speaks "of Christ as mediator and center, the one in and through the other. In mediating, Christ is the center; in being the center, Christ mediates." Ernst Feil, The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 76.



must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing."<sup>153</sup>

And in this case, persons have a choice:

. . . either God exists, in which case man remains in an infantile state, a prey to religion, "drained" by religion; or else God does not exist, in which case man is free to develop. If God exists, man is not himself. In other words, it is either God or man--we must choose.<sup>154</sup>

Bonhoeffer reverses Feuerbach's scheme and consequently rejects the alternative to which it leads. He not only rejects the idea that God lives at persons' expense, holding that God dies so that persons might live life fully<sup>155</sup>, but he holds up an autonomous, strong humanity, with his notion of a mature humanity that has come of age. With Feuerbach, Bonhoeffer eschews an omnipotent understanding of God as well as a languid view of persons.

Bonhoeffer showed in his late work, particularly the letters from prison, that God does not exploit human weakness. God is characterized by powerlessness and weakness, and the true Christian is marked by strength. The reversal is clear in who is represented in terms of power and who is characterized in terms of weakness. In this way, Bonhoeffer accepts Feuerbach's critical attitude toward religion, going beyond it by switching the terms of who has the power and who does not. While human autonomy could only be gained by dispensing with God and sick God-concepts all together by Feuerbach, the same was gained by replacing exploitative god-concepts with the "living God of the

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<sup>153</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, Necessity for a Reform in Philosophy (1842), quoted in Henry Mottu, "Feuerbach and Bonhoeffer", p. 11.

<sup>154</sup> Mottu, "Feuerbach and Bonhoeffer," op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>155</sup> Mottu, ibid., p. 11

Bible." This was exactly what a world come of age had paved the way for and what it was now ready to come to terms with.

### C. A Different God at the Heart of Human Autonomy

Bonhoeffer rejected Feuerbach's and Nietzsche's alternatives, holding up a weak, suffering God as the one true God with whom persons may enjoy a positive and healthy self-identity and relationship. As Bonhoeffer scholar Geffrey Kelly suggested, "He depicts the paradoxical weakness of God, God powerful in his helplessness on the cross."<sup>156</sup> In pointing to God's weakness and powerlessness in the world it might seem that Bonhoeffer has merely changed names--this time it is the human being who has the power and God who does not. Why is suffering still a part of the equation at all if Bonhoeffer rejected exploitative notions of power in the first place? The answer is that his theology of the cross is at the root of his reversal of Feuerbach's terms of power. It is not merely an exchange in who holds the reins of power, it is a redefinition of what true power is in the first place, and the suffering God provides the content for such a change.

At several key points in the prison letters Bonhoeffer pointed to God's weakness in the world as the touchstone for a mature humanity to understand itself. As noted above, Geffrey Kelly highlights God's paradoxical "power in weakness" as the key to understanding the implications of worldliness for Christianity. Explaining what he means by this weakness he said:

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<sup>156</sup> Kelly, "Bonhoeffer's 'Non-Religious' Christianity" *op. cit.*, p. 127.

The divine quality which most fascinated Bonhoeffer as he grappled with the implications of worldliness for Christianity was, therefore, God's paradoxical "power in weakness". This "weakness" was a very human way of describing God's willingness to respect man's autonomy, to allow himself to be "pushed out of the world" (not to dominate as an all-powerful ruler) onto the cross (but to be personally related as a loving and redeeming God), to assume man's sufferings as his own, and, finally, to forgive and console. At the same time, this is a mode of God's power, since in this way life, in the fullness intended by God's creative-redemptive acts, is affirmed and man is more effectively brought to a genuine self-transcendence. If God becomes "weak" in Christ, it is to enter into a more intimate personal relationship with man by moving man to a deeper awareness of what it means to exist only for others. Living before and with such a God involves adopting the attitude of Christ in which life is good and suffering redemptive. For Bonhoeffer, only the suffering Christ could disclose the true depths of God's kinship with man. This is the biblical picture of God in Christ which Bonhoeffer expresses in a new title, "the man for others".<sup>157</sup>

We come to the heart of the matter by looking at what Bonhoeffer means by God's weakness, God's suffering in the world, particularly as Kelly has described it. God's weakness is described in terms of paradox as a 1) description of God's willingness to respect human autonomy, allowing himself to be "pushed out of the world" and onto the cross, bearing sins and sufferings, and as 2) a mode of God's power. Kelly's analysis of Bonhoeffer's paradoxical understanding of God's "power in weakness" is faithful to Bonhoeffer's theological categories and the way he intended them. However, we would add a qualification to his portrayal of Bonhoeffer's intent with a slightly different emphasis and connotation.

Whereas Kelly describes the power of God's weakness in terms of a "willingness" to respect human autonomy and as a "mode of

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<sup>157</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Revelation in Christ. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," op. cit., pp. 64, 65.

God's power," Bonhoeffer seems to be making an even stronger, more fundamental claim about who God is and how God is present in the world. Bonhoeffer states at several different points in the prison letters the fact that God's "weakness" serves as a starting point for understanding God's true power in the world, and for this reason, we should go further than describing such divine weakness in terms of a "willingness" or a "mode" of God's power. Indeed, as we demonstrated in Chapter One, it is the axiomatic, fundamental way God's self-revelation is made known to the world. The power of God's weakness is the heart of Bonhoeffer's understanding of how God is present to a world come of age.

Again, as was shown in chapter one, God's power is essentially hidden in form from human eyes, visible only to those who have the eyes of faith. To the unbeliever, Christ will appear as weak, helpless, and impotent in the world. But through the eyes of faith, one is then able to perceive the hidden form of God's power. Indeed, this is the very way Bonhoeffer describes God's presence in the modern world. Taking pains to discern faith's concrete contours in the world, Bonhoeffer does so, describing it as a metanoia, a joining in the Messianic sufferings of God in the world, participating in life to the fullest, with all its joys and sufferings. Faith, then, becomes discernible in a non-religious way.

Secondly, as he showed in his "Outline for a Book," God's omnipotence is grounded in his "being there for others." The christological vicarious principle is the leitmotif of Bonhoeffer's understanding of God. But, more than that, it is the way in which God is power-ful in the world, and the way in which an autonomous age may understand its autonomy, power and

responsibility. Thus, Bonhoeffer lays out in fresh terms the way a mature humanity may understand faith and God. Without faith, God remains pushed out as a meaningless concept on the fringes of modern life and reality. With faith, however, the forlorn crucified Christ demonstrates the fullness of God's power in the very act of suffering and giving himself on the cross in behalf of others. God's power is hidden from view because it is defined in terms of a relationship, not as a force or object which has been limited so that humanity may be autonomous. Further, it is hidden from view because God does not demonstrate who God is in the terms that we might expect. It is a hidden power, characterized at its base by Christ's self-giving of himself for others to the point of death. God's terms of power are not that of an autonomous age, and it is this image which hides within it the very definition of who God is in a world come of age for Bonhoeffer.

Given that this hidden "power of weakness" is the key to understanding God in a modern age, what does this have to do with human autonomy per se? Hopefully, this study has demonstrated that once key terms of Bonhoeffer's Ethics are examined in relation to the Letters and Papers from Prison, more profound understandings of what he means by human autonomy and a world come of age surface than have been acknowledged up to the present. The theologia crucis is the theological matrix out of which Bonhoeffer developed his most profound statements about human autonomy, but one must be careful here. Joining in with Nietzsche and Feuerbach, he demonstrated conclusively that a weak human self-understanding is not at all what the living God of the Bible desires or brings out in persons. At the same time, however, the true God is characterized by suffering, sacrificial

action which ended in death on the cross. How, then, is a modern world with a strong self-image to understand the significance of divine suffering, sacrifice and rejection?

Bonhoeffer made it clear in his Ethics what values would characterize an autonomous age that had grown up. Responsibility stood as a central category throughout, and he defined what he meant by it: freely chosen action, deputyship (acting in others' behalf), and incurrance of guilt, leading even to death. The terms which defined his ethic of responsibility paralleled Luther's theology of the cross. In this way, Bonhoeffer introduced non-religious terms in his Ethics and elaborated on them more fully in the prison letters in relation to the weakness of God in the world.

Human autonomy, then, is defined in the same way and in accord with the way God is present and powerful in a world come of age--in terms of responsible, adult behavior: participating fully in the joys and cares of the world, recognizing and fulfilling responsibility without relying on an omnipotent God to "rescue" one and others from humanly preventable injustices and wrongs. Further, this kind of autonomy freely takes on the guilt of others. This is the most profound aspect of Bonhoeffer's definition of human autonomy in the modern world, for it zeroes in on the thoroughly social, others'-minded attitude which operates at the base of such a definition.

Suffering, rejection and death, then, are not cowardly motifs suggestive of a sick modern self-image. They are part of the necessary components of responsible, mature behavior in the world, demonstrating a "selfless self-assertion".<sup>158</sup> By incorpo-

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<sup>158</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 222.



rating rejection and incurrance of guilt into his concept of autonomous human behavior, Bonhoeffer takes a final step in integrating the terms of Luther's theology of the cross into his definition of human autonomy and power. God's presence in the world, hidden as it is in a seemingly weak, Crucified figure informs a modern human self-identity which is built upon the very same terms. In this way, Bonhoeffer's understanding of God and humanity demonstrates a profound unity at its base, suggesting the fundamental terms by which such a relationship may be discussed in an increasingly secular age with relevance, but more importantly, in truth.

### Conclusions

By examining Bonhoeffer's last two major works, Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison, we have seen how his terms of human autonomy gained their full meaning in relation to the way in which God is present in a world come of age. Just as we saw a reversal and redefinition in Bonhoeffer's concept of God in Chapter One, we have demonstrated the same "movement" with his notion of human autonomy. Exchanging omnipotent, titanic descriptions of God for those characterized by weakness, suffering and powerlessness, he exchanged languid, weak, craven descriptions of humanity for ones characterized by strength, autonomy, and maturity. We saw how Bonhoeffer did this by examining his two late works in depth individually, and by examining the terms attached to his notion of human autonomy.

In Ethics Bonhoeffer discussed human autonomy at length, and this at a time when he was very active in his work with the conspirators in their plot against Hitler. He discussed human

autonomy along two lines: with his ethic of conformation and his ethic of command. In both cases, Christ is the one with whom we are in relation, to whom we conform and whose call we follow. Just as we saw in his radio address in 1933, Bonhoeffer again demonstrated his concern for the correct structuring of authority with his notion of God's commandment. We saw his penchant for ordering society according to superiority and inferiority, yet how this conservative category gained its meaning in terms of responsibility. From first to last, Bonhoeffer's theology was one of sociality and interpersonal relations, and with the Ethics we saw a change in his sense of authority. As one scholar aptly noted:

In the course of his short life, Bonhoeffer had many occasions to redefine this world--from an aristocracy of training and position to an aristocracy of character and intelligence (e.g., his concept of Bildung and his view of human rights). His sense of authority changed accordingly. His theology of interpersonal relations made him ever more open to the reconstruction of human community by free and responsible human interaction.<sup>159</sup>

Just as Bonhoeffer was able to speak of God's absolute rule in the Christian community in terms of sacrificial service and love in Sanctorum Communio, he likewise was able to speak of the God who commands in terms of responsibility--a concept marked by selfless self-assertion. In both cases, ruling was defined in terms of serving--a paradigm established by Jesus Christ, the man for others and the vicarious principle of "being there for others". Bonhoeffer did not cease to structure authority based on this christological principle, never losing sight of the

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<sup>159</sup> West, "Ground Under Our Feet" op. cit., p. 41.

selfless sociality which lay at the base of true authority and power. We see this expressed most highly in his prison letter of 23 January 1944<sup>160</sup> in his thoughts about friendship and how this dimension of human existence is sui generis, of a different and higher order than the mandates.

Bonhoeffer developed his thoughts about human autonomy in the prison letters, utilizing interesting terms like a "world come of age" and the "non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts," and this at a time when any ability to utilize his power for others was stripped from him. He was powerless, confined, silenced. Before we examined the material content and ramifications of these ideas, we paused to see how Bonhoeffer was influenced in his critique of religion and the extent to which power and weakness lay at the heart of his critique. We saw not only that power figures into his notion of religion and concomitant critique of it, but how it does so in concert with four different critiques of religion as well. Two of his theological contemporaries--Barth and Bultmann, and two atheistic philosophers of the nineteenth century--Nietzsche and Feuerbach, all spoke in terms of power and weakness when it came to religion. Barth showed how the religious person tries to occupy a place of power over against God by reducing God to a concept or idea which can be drawn upon conveniently in times of need, whereas Bultmann rejected the notion of God's power exploiting the human being's existential situation of weakness. Power exploited by humanity and by God--these were the terms of religion against which both men declared war, and Bonhoeffer joined them in their battlecry.

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<sup>160</sup> As well as his poem, "The Friend" which was a gift for Eberhard Bethge, pp. 388-391.

Both Nietzsche and Feuerbach saw religion as instilling and reinforcing a victimized, languid image of humanity and a despotic, vampire-like image of God, feeding off his impotent creature. For both, power rested with the divine, having been illegitimately wrested from humanity. Such a religion, with its attendant slavish morality was repugnant to them, and they fought to reinstate such virtues as human strength, health, power, and autonomy in their "philosophies of life." Bonhoeffer joined them on two fronts--in rejecting the polar images of a lifeless, powerless humanity and a tyrannical, autocratic God. He did this by reversing the terms which both philosophers attributed to humanity and the god-concept. Power, life, autonomy, health--these were no longer descriptive of an imaginary God which had been projected by an enervated humanity. These were the honest appraisals of a world-come-of-age, tired of childish images and values.

Against this worn out image of God, Bonhoeffer held up the living God, who is weak and powerless, forcing the terms of Christianity. While humanity is certainly autonomous in that it may freely reject this God who is revealed in this manner, Bonhoeffer holds that such weakness hides God's true power, and the fact that this rejected Christ stands at the center of human history and reality, holding it all together. In this way, it is a Christonomy, just as Bonhoeffer suggested in the Ethics. There is no human autonomy which may exist without God, having rejected him. God remains at the center of the world, hidden beneath the cross, his power going unobserved, yet in the midst of the world, for it, nonetheless. Bonhoeffer pushes the Christian claim to its limits, then, with his notion of human autonomy. For with it, he provides not only the terms by which

a mature world may understand itself; he calls such an identity into view in the light of a God who rules the world by the ultimate sacrificial service of all which is continually offered to all--bearing the guilt of our sins in our place, pro nobis, and offering forgiveness--freedom.

Just as he forced the terms of Christianity in a world come of age with the suffering God who stands rejection, Bonhoeffer simultaneously pushed the claim of an increasingly secular, mature world, pointing out its hidden weakness. In the Ethics Bonhoeffer referred to a godlessness characterized by idolatry and self-deification, a godlessness which does not recognize sin and thus the need for forgiveness. Standing in the center of the world, this kind of godlessness doops itself into thinking it rules without God. Bonhoeffer depicted the problem this way in his Creation and Fall, showing Adam's attempt to co-opt God at the center of life.

There is a right godlessness, however, and Bonhoeffer draws out its self-identity in non-religious terms as a mature, responsible humanity that joins in God's messianic sufferings in the world. Fundamental to this kind of responsible "godlessness" is a taking on of other's guilt, recognizing the need for justification and the fact that Jesus Christ alone confers forgiveness and freedom. In this way, having demonstrated the power which is hidden in the weak figure of Jesus Christ on the cross, Bonhoeffer simultaneously identifies the weakness hidden at the center of a godless world. The German pastor elaborated on this need for forgiveness, for justification, in a world come of age with his provocative concept of the arcane discipline, and we shall look to that idea in chapter four in order to better apprehend the ethical expression of human power and autonomy in

this modern age, as well as the dialectical power of God's weakness. However, we must first pause to see how Bonhoeffer understood sin in the first place and the terms in which he cast it.



This means that one thing is certain, that where love towards the other is destroyed man can only hate his limit. Then he only wants to possess or deny the other person without limit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall,  
p. 61.

## CHAPTER THREE

BONHOEFFER'S ETHICAL INTERPRETATION OF SIN:  
"POWER" IN CREATION AND FALLIntroduction

In previous chapters we examined how power figures into Bonhoeffer's theology, a theology bearing the mark of the cross of Jesus Christ. Power and weakness surfaced in his most basic understanding of God and person. We find this is no less true in Bonhoeffer's statements on creation and sin. "Statements" rather than "doctrine" or "category" are more accurate because Bonhoeffer did not attempt systematization in this area.<sup>1</sup> However, even though he lacks an explicit synthesis of thought on creation or sin in general, he did have quite specific things to say about them during the winter 1932-33 term at the University of Berlin.

Creation and Fall is a small but significant work, written by the German theologian at a time when the issue of human origins and the "orders of creation" were receiving much emphasis among leading theologians. In this little work, we see Bonhoeffer intentionally refocusing the issue from a prelapsarian

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<sup>1</sup> One Bonhoeffer scholar described how Bonhoeffer's interest in systematic theology diminished and he turned "more and more to the realm of practical theology and the theological exposition of the Bible." Rather than a diminished interest in theology, he had simply found another way of expressing this interest that was necessary and relevant for that particular time. John Godsey, The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (London: SCM Press Limited, 1960), p. 119.

question of origins to the postlapsarian issue of preservation. Eberhard Bethge said, "It was an ethical uneasiness which led him to devote himself to the subject of this lecture."<sup>2</sup> With the nationalistic furor over the politicized notion of human origins, Bonhoeffer saw the need to construct a theological defense. Until now, Bonhoeffer scholarship has been more concerned with the methodological value of Creation and Fall than with its material benefit.<sup>3</sup> This study seeks to remedy such an imbalance by providing an in-depth investigation into the content of Creation and Fall. By examining Bonhoeffer's theological interpretation of the Genesis narrative and its consequences in the human relationship, we find an understanding of sin which challenges Luther's traditional interpretation. The ethical character of sin in Bonhoeffer's Creation and Fall demonstrates one way power recurs as a fundamental motif. It is to this ethically-nuanced understanding of sin that we now turn.

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<sup>2</sup> Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Man of Vision, Man of Courage, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Feil, in his thorough-going depiction of Bonhoeffer's theology, restricts his focus to locating Creation and Fall within Bonhoeffer's overall theological movement. For example, he says, "It is the course on creation and fall . . . which shows how rapidly and consciously Bonhoeffer's theology became centered in christology. A decisive advance in his christological reflection took place in that course." Ernst Feil, The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, trans. Martin Rumscheidt, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 72-74). Feil then proceeds to introduce new themes and developments in Creation and Fall which further Bonhoeffer's Christology. While Feil has decided to place his emphasis on theological classification, I am more interested in unpacking one of the thematics in the book, i.e., Bonhoeffer's ethical interpretation of sin. Indeed, such an investigation seems warranted in that Bethge himself testifies that in Creation and Fall "[t]he content of what he said turned out to be more important than the demonstration of any 'theological method' . . . there can be no ignoring the profundity of his utterances . . ." Bethge, op. cit., p. 163.

## I. Luther's Systematic Definition of Sin

Revisionism is not a novel occurrence in the history of the church. Luther boldly took on fourteen hundred years of Catholic tradition with a theology which questioned the very basis of the reigning Church at the time. While Irenaeus in the second century formulated the distinction between image (imago) and likeness (similitudo), saying the imago Dei (human reason or rationality) had been retained in the Fall in a defected sense while the likeness to God had been lost, Luther believed such a distinction was false, and he used the terms interchangeably, believing any likeness or similarity to God lost irreparably in the Fall. He came with a new method, stepping out of a conventional schema, interchanging terms, ignoring old customs and traditions.

With his exegetical method, Luther shifted the notion of the imago Dei from a reified concept, as it had been in the Catholic tradition, to a social, relational paradigm. Here, the image of God is understood best as the uninterrupted relationship between God and the person as a recipient of God's grace. In this sense, Luther broke with fourteen hundred years of tradition which had referred to human rationality as the imago Dei. Nothing, not even human reason, comes through the Fall unscathed--it is all corrupt and in need of God's divine grace.

Luther advances a postlapsarian anthropology which is systematic at its base. His doctrine of sin includes sin's "root" (radix), "fruit" (fructus) and "issue" (eventus). He described the root and source of sin as unbelief or unfaith (Unglaube). It is the absence of faith, as depicted in Romans 14:23 ("But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats, because

he does not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.") He went on to describe sin's "fruit" as ontic egocentricity--the state of being turned in to the self (incurvatus in se). Another phrase he used to depict this aspect of sin is through his imagery of the person turning from God toward the creature (aversio a Deo, conversio ad creaturam). This is the opposite of the love that does not seek its own, as I Corinthians 13:5 demonstrates ("it [love] is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful"). The condition of being turned in upon oneself is described in more specific detail by Luther as pride, arrogance or going beyond appointed limits (as in the Latin superbia or the German Hoffart).

Finally, for Luther the concrete manifestation of sin in the world, sin's "issue," is an attitude of thanklessness (Undankbarkeit) or ingratitude. He refers to Romans 1:21 in his depiction of thanklessness: "for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened." Luther labels ingratitude "the most shameful sin." Not only that, such an attitude is a "robbery of God in three ways." Ingratitude toward God signals a robbery of God, and therefore is a violation of faith; it is robbery of one's neighbor, which is a violation of love; and it is a robbery of one's self, a violation of hope. Not only is sin a systematic concept for Luther, there are intricate interrelationships within its own structural definition. For the father of Lutheranism, the Augustinian notion of sin as concupiscence was misguided. Sin is a social concept at its heart, one in which the human creature is in wrong relationship with the Creator.

Bonhoeffer interpreted sin along the same basic lines, but differed from Luther when it came to the nature of sin's event in the world. Like his predecessor, Bonhoeffer thought the root of all sin is pride, superbia:

The root of all sin is pride, superbia. I want to be my own law, I have a right to my self, my hatred and my desires, my life and my death. The mind and flesh of man are set on fire by pride; for it is precisely in his wickedness that man wants to be as God.<sup>4</sup>

Luther described sin's issue or event in the world in terms of an attitude--ingratitude. His interpretation of sin's eventus as thanklessness provides the theological junction where his twentieth century protégé brought new insight. Creation and Fall holds the key to his revision of the third part of Luther's triadic hamartiological impulse.

## II. Bonhoeffer's Ethical Definition of Sin: Middle and Boundary

It is interesting that Bonhoeffer followed Luther's method of theological exegesis in interpreting Genesis 1-3. By examining groups of verses and commenting on them, Bonhoeffer followed a form of analysis re-instituted by Barth.<sup>5</sup> Like Luther

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, trans. John W. Doberstein, (London: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954), pp. 113-14; see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Spiritual Care, trans. Jay C. Rochelle, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer's form of textual analysis does not preclude the methods of philological and historical research. Cf. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 162. Bonhoeffer preceded Barth himself as well as others in drawing material conclusions from his Christocentric treatment of the Old Testament.



before him, Bonhoeffer spoke of the imago Dei in social terms characterized by freedom, a freedom pro me, pro nobis.<sup>6</sup>

Bonhoeffer made a decisive advance in his christology as his use of concepts demonstrated. Up until this time, he had been concerned with the question of boundary and limit, Christ representing extrinsicality.<sup>7</sup> Now, in Creation and Fall he incorporated the notion of the center, the middle (mitte) with the notion of limit or boundary. This conceptuality manifested itself in at least three ways in Creation and Fall.

First, the eschatological thrust is obvious throughout the exegesis. In his introduction to the published version of the lectures, Bonhoeffer said,

The Church of Holy Scripture--and there is no other "Church"--lives from the end. Therefore it reads all Holy Scripture as the book of the end, of the new, of Christ. What does Holy Scripture, upon which the Church of Christ is grounded, have to say of the creation and the beginning except that only from Christ can we know what the beginning is? . . . [t]herefore the Scriptures need to be read and proclaimed wholly from the viewpoint of the end . . . [w]e can read towards Christ only if we know that

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Bethge mentions that Creation and Fall was the first book of Bonhoeffer's that Barth read. His reaction to it was mixed, although he thought Bonhoeffer's fidelity to the text went beyond that of other notable interpreters of the day. Cf. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> "In man God creates his image on earth. This means that man is like the Creator in that he is free...[a]nyone investigating man to discover freedom finds nothing of it. Why? because freedom is not a quality which can be revealed--it is not a possession, a presence, an object, nor is it a form of existence--but a relationship and nothing else. In truth, freedom is a relationship between two persons. Being free means "being free for the other," because the other has been bound to him. Only in relation with the other am I free." Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall. A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1959), p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> This is especially apparent in Act and Being.

Christ is the beginning, the new and the end of our world.<sup>8</sup>

The Church lives according to the end, the limit, the boundary. The end of history directs the Church in the present, as history unfolds from the now, from the middle.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the eschatological hermeneutic for the Church comes from the more specific Barthian hermeneutic principle that Christ interprets the Old Testament. The Scripture is regarded as a unified whole in a way which simply had not existed before Barth's christological method of exegesis. Christ, the fulfillment of the Scriptures, makes it possible to understand the creation story, the beginning. The end interprets the beginning--indeed, there is no other way to correctly understand the Creation account, according to this exegetical method.

Thirdly, and most importantly for this study, Bonhoeffer's material interpretation of the Fall is consistent with his methodological hermeneutic. The 'middle-limit' language is not only potent imagery, but fully ingredient to the essence of his interpretation of sin. In his section on "The Middle of the Earth" (Genesis 2:8-17)<sup>10</sup>, Bonhoeffer focuses on the fact that the two trees--the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil--occupy the middle of the garden. He discusses the significance of their location:

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<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, p. 12. The Barthian "Word of God" impress is clear.

<sup>9</sup> This eschatological thematic of the end informing the middle represents the earliest basis of Bonhoeffer's important eschatology-ethics theme which was so important in his late theology (particularly his notion of the penultimate and the ultimate). It is significant to note that as early as 1932 he was already thinking in these terms.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, pp. 48-57.

First of all there is the tree of life. . . . [i]t was in the middle--that is all that is said about it. The life that comes forth from God is in the middle. This means that God, who gives life, is in the middle . . . Adam's life comes from the middle which is not Adam himself but God. . . . [i]t is characteristic of man that his life is a constant circling around its middle, but that it never takes possession of it . . .

Like the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil stands in the middle of the garden. But the reference to it contains a special Word of God: the prohibition to eat of it and the threat of death as soon as man transgresses this commandment . . . [t]wo things are contained in the prohibition. First, there is the reference to Adam's being as man, to his freedom . . . [s]econdly, this man . . . is shown his limit, that is to say, his creatureliness . . . [m]an's limit is in the middle of his existence, not on the edge. The limit which we look for on the edge is the limit of his condition, of his technology, of his possibilities. The limit in the middle is the limit of his reality, of his true existence.<sup>11</sup>

Bonhoeffer goes on to say that Adam knows his life is possible only by his limit, that he lives from this limit which is in the middle. The connection between the notions of boundary and middle is patently clear. It is remarkable how Bonhoeffer can explicate such typically opposing terms in such an interpenetrating and related way. God is the giver of life as represented by the two trees in the center of the Garden. Adam is told by God not to bother the tree of knowledge, reminding him of his creaturely boundary. The trees represent the center and source of life, Adam as a limited creature.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 51, 52. (Emphasis original). This notion of the boundary being fundamentally connected to the middle comes to expression again in Bonhoeffer's late theology, in one of his most famed quotes which depicts God on the edge or boundary, yet fully in the center of life: "Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us." Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 360.

Bonhoeffer interprets the significance of the garden of Eden as well as that of the inhabitants who dwell therein. After describing the garden, Bonhoeffer examines Genesis 2:18-25 and entitles it "The Strength of the Other Person."<sup>12</sup> The creation of Eve is the focus of the passage, and Bonhoeffer interprets it in a very provocative way. Eve is described as Adam's limit, a notion which ordinarily would carry negative, parasitic connotations. This is not so with Bonhoeffer. Indeed, for him, the category of "limit" is a positive term in its prelapsarian usage. He says,

Thus Adam knows that this creature, whom God has shaped with his assistance, out of his flesh, is unique, but he sees this action of his upon the other entirely as a gift of God. The fact that Eve derives from him is in Adam's eyes not a cause for glorification but for special gratitude. He does not put forward any claim for himself: he knows that he is connected in a completely new way to this Eve. . . . [i]t is best to describe this unity by saying that now he belongs to her because she belongs to him.<sup>13</sup>

Bonhoeffer then goes on to make his most profound remarks about the way Eve is a "helper" to Adam:

In his unfathomable mercy the Creator knew that this creaturely, free life can only be born in limitation if it is loved, and out of this mercy he created a companion for man who must be at once the embodiment of Adam's limit and the object of his love . . . [t]he other person is the limit placed upon me by God. I love this limit and I shall not transgress it because of my love . . . [i]n the creation of the other person freedom and creatureliness are bound together in love. That is why the other person is grace to the first . . . [i]n this common bearing of the limit by the first two human beings in community, is tested the character of this community as the Church. This means that one

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-63.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

thing is certain, that where love towards the other is destroyed man can only hate his limit. Then he only wants to possess or deny the other person without limit.<sup>14</sup>

Before the Fall, Eve is described as Adam's limit. But, this is the very nature of God's grace, according to Bonhoeffer's interpretation. Man can only live in freedom by living in accord with his limit. Bonhoeffer points out that "the other" is grace to the first, just as the prohibition to eat of the tree of knowledge was grace. It all turns on Bonhoeffer's notion of limit--limit as grace before sin has entered history. 'Limit,' which tends to carry a negative connotation, such as barrier, obstacle or hindrance is given a fresh, positive, graceful interpretation through Bonhoeffer's provocative exegesis. He has already alluded to what becomes explicit with the Fall--the double meaning attached to "limit." The prelapsarian understanding of "the other" as limit connotes personal relationship typified by thankfulness, mutual service, and unity. The postlapsarian understanding alludes to objectification of the other typified by ingratitude, domination, and division.

We move on to the next passage in the narrative. Based on Bonhoeffer's exegesis of Eve's creation account, and after

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 61. A similar emphasis is echoed in Life Together where Bonhoeffer discussed the difference between human love and spiritual love. There, he spoke of human love "not loving the other as a free person but as one whom it binds to itself. It wants to gain, to capture by every means; it uses force. It desires to be irresistible, to rule." Spiritual love, on the other hand, loves the free person. The notion of Christ in the middle (die Mitte) between persons is crucial here also, for human love seeks direct access to the person whereas spiritual love accepts the in cognito of the other, and the fact that access to the other can only occur through Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, pp. 34, 35; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gemeinsames Leben, (Berlin: Evangelische Berlagsanstalt, 1954), pp. 19-20.

comparing the original German text to the English translation, this section of theological interpretation warrants clarification. The English translation translates the subtitle for the section on Genesis 2:18-25 as "The Strength of the Other Person."<sup>15</sup> The German text subtitle is "Die Kraft des anderen." The word "Kraft" does mean "strength," but it can also mean power, force, and energy. Why did the translator choose "strength"? A bit of explanation brings to light the ambiguity involved in translating Bonhoeffer's German into English.

It is more appropriate to translate "Kraft" as "strength" when the reference is corporeal or moral; as "power" when the reference is spiritual or creative.<sup>16</sup> John Fletcher, the translator of the 1959 English edition, chose "strength" to depict the meaning of "Kraft" in the subtitle, and there is good reason for this. Bonhoeffer defines Eve, the "other", as Adam's limit in a creaturely, bodily sense. She was created from his body; as a corporeal companion, she is his limit. It is a "physical" strength (as Kraft connotes in this context) in the same sense that it is a "corporeal" or bodily strength. It would be easy to think muscular strength or force is meant when using the word "physical strength," and indeed, it often does in general usage. But here, in Creation and Fall, according to Bonhoeffer's exegesis, the "strength" refers to the bodily existence of the other. Bonhoeffer's section on "The New" (Das Neue) confirms this, describing the pivotal significance of corporeality for Bonhoeffer's notion of "the other." In this

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> "Force" and "Energy" have more specialized connotations and do not hold the same level of ambiguity as that between "strength" and "power." Cf. Collins German-English, English-German Dictionary, p. 410.



sense, then, Fletcher's translation is on the mark and faithfully reflects the spirit and intent of Bonhoeffer's exegesis.

However, there is an inconsistency in Fletcher's translation of the word Kraft which evidences a heretofore unacknowledged aspect of Bonhoeffer's overall theological interpretation of Genesis 1-3. In his section "The Strength of the Other," Bonhoeffer is exegeting Gen. 2:23, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man."<sup>17</sup> He extols the gratitude, thankfulness, and selfless character of Adam's recognition of the new creature:

Thus Adam knows that this creature, whom God has shaped with his assistance, out of his flesh, is unique, but he sees this action of his upon the other entirely as a gift of God. The fact that Eve derives from him is in Adam's eyes not a cause for glorification but for special gratitude. He does not put forward any claim for himself . . .<sup>18</sup>

Then, extending "the limit" from applying only to Eve to include anyone other than oneself (i.e., "the other") he goes on to say that out of God's mercy man's companion is simultaneously the embodiment of Adam's limit and the object of his love.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer makes the remark, "And in fact the love for woman was not to be the life of man in the truest sense." I think Bonhoeffer was on the right road with the categories of limit and life here, but he went awry in carrying out their meaning. I would take up his category and discussion, suggesting that while "the other" is one's limit, life consists in the mutual relationship of service between the two, as Bonhoeffer alluded to earlier. Bonhoeffer does not follow the "pattern" or "logic" of his own categories here, so what ends up distracting by unintentional sexist overtone can be resolved when one applies Bonhoeffer's own pattern of thinking to his thoughts here on limit and life.

other person is grace and gift, helping one to live before God in community.

But then we come to the decisive passage. Bonhoeffer concludes this subsection on what "the other" means as limit:

The power of the other person, in which I live in the presence of God has now become the power of the other person by which I must die before God. The power of life becomes the power of destruction, power of community becomes power of isolation, power of love becomes power of hate.<sup>20</sup>

The controlling motif is "power" and how it has changed due to sin's irreparable damage. This passage is interesting when the English text is compared to the German:

Die Kraft des anderen, in der ich vor Gott lebe, ist mir nun die Kraft des Anderen, durch die ich vor Gott sterben muss. Kraft des Lebens wird Kraft der Vernichtung, Kraft der Gemeinschaft wird Kraft der Vereinsamung, Kraft der Liebe wird Kraft des Hasses.<sup>21</sup>

The title of this subsection certainly seems to take its cue from this concluding passage, given the parallel use of terms. In the German, the subsection title mirrors the phrase in the passage above, "Die Kraft des anderen." Why, then, does Fletcher translate it "The Strength of the Other" in the title and "The power of the other" in the passage from which the title originates? I have already suggested why Fletcher probably chose "strength" for the subtitle, but now the issue is raised--which is correct? The query is resolved quickly when one tries to

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<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Schöpfung und Fall, printed in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke: Schöpfung und Fall, vol. 3 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1989), p. 93.

insert "strength" where Fletcher used "power" in the passage cited above. Substituting "strength" in place of "power" is not appropriate for the context of Bonhoeffer's concluding remark. "Power" is the more accurate translation of "Kraft" so that the subtitle should read "The Power of the Other."

Not only does the translation inconsistency bear this out, but the thrust of the content points to the concept of power being the more contextually accurate one. Bonhoeffer has just drawn out the meaning of sin's effect or event in the world in terms of power. Before the fall, the "other" was described in thoroughly relational terms as grace to the other, as gift toward the other. Attitude and action between Adam and Eve were characterized by gratitude, selflessness and mutual service toward one another. This was the power of the "other," Eve, before the Fall.

Then, with the advent of sin came a complete distortion of that power. The "other" was still described in social terms, but the terms themselves had changed. The other person was no longer grace, but wrath to the other, no longer a gift but a burden. The attitude and actions characterizing Adam and Eve were characterized by ingratitude, selfishness, and opposition. But the vectorial nature of Bonhoeffer's description of power's changed status is perhaps the most fascinating component of his description of sin in terms of power. It is so subtle, yet so central to his interpretation that it must be acknowledged for a more accurate appreciation of his exegesis.

Before the Fall, power was described positively with Adam defining himself in terms of his limit, Eve. He did not occupy the center of the relationship, rather, it was a reflexive notion, in which both Adam and Eve understood themselves

fundamentally from the vantage point of the other. After the Fall, however, power was described negatively with Adam defining himself in a self-reflexive manner, with no fundamental reference to Eve. Now he occupies the center of the relationship, Eve has been transgressed (and perhaps figuratively, pushed aside) having become a burden or obstacle, and power which was once service with and for the other has become power which is domination of one over and to the exclusion of the other. In this way, it becomes evident that Bonhoeffer is talking about sin's event or actual occurrence in the world in ethical terms and in terms of power.

This brings us to what actually happened in the Fall, according to Bonhoeffer's exegesis. Limit and center provide the basis by which Bonhoeffer understands original sin. He describes it in two ways:

In the first place the middle has been entered, the limit has been transgressed. Now man stands in the middle, now he is without limit. That he stands in the middle means that now he lives out of his own resources and no longer from the middle. That he is without a limit means that he is alone. To be in the middle and to be alone means to be like God. Man is sicut deus. Now he lives out of himself, now he creates his own life, he is his own creator . . . [w]ith this his creatureliness is finished and destroyed for him. Adam is no longer creature. He has torn himself away from his creatureliness . . . [t]ogether with the limit Adam has lost his creatureliness.<sup>22</sup>

Bonhoeffer follows solidly in Luther's steps, drawing out the egocentric "fruit" of sin as man's living "out of himself" (incurvatus in se). But he does this using the language of boundary and middle (Grenze and Mitte). The symbolic value of

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<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, p. 72.

the tree of knowledge in the middle of the garden reaches its full impact. The center is man's limit, it is God's chosen place. By heeding the words of the tempter and eating the fruit Adam and Eve have chosen to "renounce the Word of God which constantly descends upon [them] out of the unenterable middle and limit of life . . . and usurp it for themselves."<sup>23</sup>

The limit God placed on man has been entered, and man now tries to occupy the place which is reserved for God alone. Adam has, literally and figuratively, overstepped his boundary, thereby changing forever the relationship between Creator and created. But by transgressing the limit, Adam's other intimate relationship has been irretrievably affected. Eve, who represents Bonhoeffer's limit, has been violated:

It is clear, however, that for the Fall, if the limit were to be transgressed in opposition to the Creator this would have to coincide with the transgression of the limit within the world of creation. Every transgression of the limit is bound to mean at the same time an attack upon the creatureliness of the other person. The violation of the tree of knowledge has to be at the same time a violation of the other person.<sup>24</sup>

Now we come to the part of Bonhoeffer's exegesis which deals with the "issue" (eventus) of sin, the third part of Luther's triadic

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 73. I have translated the "reissen" as "usurp" rather than "snatches" in the quote. The German translation reads, "er verzichtet auf das Leben aus diesem Wort und reißt es an sich selbst." The Collins German dictionary indicates the verb "reissen," when used with the reflexive pronoun "sich" means "to seize. However, it also lists the slightly different word "usurp" when the reference is to power (Macht). cf. Peter Terrell et al., Collins German-English, English-German Dictionary, Glasgow: Collins, 1988), p. 542. The word preference reflects the more specific context which I am arguing lies at the root of Bonhoeffer's exegesis of the creation and fall narrative.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

definition. As mentioned above, Luther saw the concrete manifestation of sin in terms of an attitude of ingratitude (undankbarkeit). When we look to the consequences of the Fall for Adam and Eve, Bonhoeffer takes the notion of ingratitude one step further.

When Adam and Eve recognized their nakedness and shame, as Genesis 3:7 recounts, Bonhoeffer interprets the passage in the following manner:

Eve, the other person, had been to Adam the bodily form of the given limit whom he acknowledged in love, i.e. in the undivided unity of his devotion and whom he loved in her very nature as limit, i.e. because she was human and yet "another person." Now that he has transgressed the limit, he knows for the first time that he was limited . . . [n]ow he no longer sees the limit of the other person as grace but as the wrath, the hatred, the envy of God. This means that he no longer sees the other person in love. He sees him over against himself, at variance with himself. Now the limit is no longer grace, holding man in the unity of his creaturely and free love; it is discord. Man and woman are divided. This means two things. First of all, man makes use of his share in the woman's body; more generally, one man makes use of his right to the other and puts forward his claim to the possession of the other, thereby denying and destroying the other person's creatureliness.<sup>25</sup>

Like Luther, Bonhoeffer believes with the advent of sin, ingratitude toward God and others occurs. He affirms this by saying the woman is no longer seen as a gift for which to be grateful, but as a burden. The grateful attitude disappears and is replaced with hatred. But it is more than that. Sin's "event" in the world has an ethical character. Bonhoeffer was influenced by Friedrech Christoph Oetinger, a seventeenth century

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 77, 78.



theologian, who emphasized the significance of the physical body.<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer took such a consideration seriously, explicating in detail the ethical/physical ramifications of sin's event in the world.

By overstepping his limit in the garden and trying to occupy God's place in the center, Adam's understanding of his fellow human being as "limit" has a new meaning. Before, Eve was Adam's "limit" in the sense that she was a fellow human being, a person, with whom Adam could share a relationship. She was a gift by God for Adam, and one whom he was given in a mutually serving relationship--they were as one. However, with sin's advent in the world, Eve was seen by Adam to be a burden. Gone was the love and gratitude which had defined Adam's feelings and actions toward Eve. Now, there was desire to possess, dominate and seize.<sup>27</sup> The ethical force of Bonhoeffer's interpretation is explicit and provocative.

Bonhoeffer highlights the fact that Eve's creaturely existence, in bodily form, is the most basic aspect of God's gift to Adam. He was no longer alone--he was given another human companion. Community, or sociality, defines the very essence of the gift. After the Fall, Eve was a burden to overcome, an object to seize or possess. God's grace became God's wrath. The relationship of mutual care and serving one another became one of domination and objectification. Gift became scorn, the sociality between Adam and Eve being rifted apart in its very

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<sup>26</sup> Oetinger said, "The end of the ways of God is bodiliness" See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Schöpfung und Fall, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> In Life Together Bonhoeffer spoke of sin in terms of human "absorption" of the other (p. 33) and "domination and force" (p. 94). The ethical expression of self-justification occurred in these terms while the ethical expression of justification by grace manifested itself in terms of service.

essence. By taking Luther's notion of sin as ingratitude one step further, he added a thoroughly ethical connotation to sin's event in the world.<sup>28</sup>

### III. Conclusions Regarding "Power" in Creation and Fall

Thanks to Bonhoeffer's exegetical work on Genesis 1-3, creation and sin are understood from a new paradigm. Power surfaces as a category through which he interprets the creation and fall of Adam and Eve. Evidence for this hermeneutical key does not rest simply on the section whose title and thrust was questioned--"The Strength of the Other." Previous chapters have demonstrated how the concept "power" lies at the center of Bonhoeffer's concept of God and humanity. It is no less so for his understanding of sin.

The concepts Bonhoeffer employs in Creation and Fall are replete with reference to power. Adam is characterized as "invading" the center of the garden, trying to take God's place; he violates his limit, transgressing God. He does the same thing with his companion, trespassing and changing forever his relationship with his fellow human being. Bonhoeffer uses specific language to characterize the relationship between Adam and Eve before the Fall: gift, grace, love, service, community, unity, mutuality; and, after the Fall: wrath, burden, hatred, domination, division, self-centeredness and egocentricity. It

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<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that Luther did not also have ethical qualities about his interpretation of sin as eventus. He spoke of sin as a robbery of God (thus, a violation of faith), of the neighbor (a violation of hope) and of one's self (love). However, Luther does not place the same concrete force in his definition as Bonhoeffer does. More than a robbery, it is closer to an invasion or violation of a person. The meaning is much more socially and ethically nuanced.

is interesting to see how he consistently discusses power in terms of sociality.<sup>29</sup> An intimate relationship between persons, characterized by selfless giving of oneself to the other--this is Bonhoeffer's definition of community as God created it. However, once tainted by sin, the relationship deteriorates to one in which "the other" becomes de-humanized, objectivized and dominated (no longer seen as person but as thing to be manipulated). Bonhoeffer has described the prelapsarian and postlapsarian condition in terms of power. But the fact that he has done this, consistently, in terms of power in Creation and Fall has gone by unacknowledged. How can this be so if it is so basic to his overall argument?

The problem has to do with definitions and how we understand terms. Bonhoeffer has offered an understanding of power in its sinful condition and in its ideal condition. I would argue that "power," as a concept, is understood most often in terms of its postlapsarian definition. In its more negative forms, power is understood as domination, despotism, aggression. In less dramatic terms it is also understood as control, possession. Most people tend to think of power as a negative concept when it involves more "obvious" abuse, such as tyranny or violent domination of others. However, there is another aspect to the sinful definition of power which is commonly accepted as normative and which, I would argue, more often than not, does not carry negative value.

When power is reified--that is, when it is understood as a thing to be obtained, possessed, seized or controlled, it is a non-social concept at its base. Bonhoeffer, however, defined

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Appendix I for Bethge's comments on the "relatedness" of power, pp. 307-08.

power in thoroughly social terms. In its prelapsarian definition, "the other" is seen as a gift from God, someone who is in a self-giving relationship with another. In its postlapsarian definition, "the other" is seen as a burden from God, no longer some-one but some-thing to be dominated, possessed or controlled. Whereas the first definition connotes self-giving service for and with another, the second connotes self-centered objectification of the other. These are the terms of power, and Bonhoeffer holds up a social understanding of power in contrast to the reified definition.

Bonhoeffer's theological scheme suggests an asocial, reified notion of power prevails in the sinful world over the social understanding of power he envisions. We have seen that the nature of sin, according to his exegesis, is to objectivize 'the other' so that the person is, literally, de-personalized, de-humanized and regarded as a burden or object to be manipulated. Sin attempts to objectivize the other and dominate him/her--this is its nature. The danger comes when an asocial, objectivizing notion of "power" is accepted as normative, and this kind of definition has occurred in the Western psyche, in both the Church and society at large.

If it is the case, that power is regarded as something to be obtained (asocial definition) by society in the West, then how can such a "definition" be challenged?<sup>30</sup> Several constructive options arise. First, the "normative" understanding of power must be challenged. Bonhoeffer does this by pitting his social definition against the more commonly accepted asocial notion. If the German pastor's alternative interpretation is heard,

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<sup>30</sup> I use the word "definition" loosely, in the sense that a concept is accepted as normative by society at large.

acknowledged or even accepted, then the fact that a sinful definition of power has been in place must be confronted. The problem is that presently, Western society does not recognize that such a negative connotation tends to be operative within the structure of power's conventional meaning. Bonhoeffer confronts the contemporary world with the category of sin, you might say.

If the Church or non-religious society were to accept the new definition of power, where does that leave us? From the Christian perspective, we no longer exist in a prelapsarian society or community--indeed, far from it. This is where Bonhoeffer's eschatological interpretation of Genesis 1-3 is helpful. Adopting the Barthian method of exegesis, the creation and fall narrative can only be understood from a christological vantage point. Only Christ can interpret the story fully. Bonhoeffer resolves the human dilemma by referring back to the tree of life.<sup>31</sup> He says,

Indeed, it is now obvious that the whole story has really been about this tree . . . [t]he desperate feature of Adam's situation is just that he lives out of himself, he is imprisoned within himself, and thus he can only desire himself, he can only crave for himself, for he is his own God, he has become the creator of his own life. When he seeks God, when he seeks life, then he only seeks himself . . . Adam has eaten of the tree of knowledge, but the thirst for the tree of life, which this fruit has given him, remains unquenched. The limit that divides Adam's field from paradise shall from now on be here--where stands the tree of life.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The reference is to Genesis 3:22-4:1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, pp. 89-94.

<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer, ibid., pp. 89-91.

Then, he interprets Genesis 3:24<sup>33</sup>, making the decisive connection:

The limit has not shifted, it is where it always was, in the unenterable middle of the tree of life. But now Adam stands in another place; this limit is no longer in the middle of his life, but it afflicts him from outside, he must continually run against it . . . [t]he stem of the Cross becomes the staff of life, and in the midst of the world life is set up anew upon the cursed ground. In the middle of the world the spring of life wells up on the wood of the cross and those who thirst for life are called to this water, and those who have eaten of the wood of this life shall never hunger and thirst again . . . [w]hat a strange tree of life, this tree on which God himself must suffer and die--but it is in fact the Kingdom of Life and of the Resurrection given again by God in grace; it is the opened door of imperishable hope, of waiting and of patience. The tree of life, the Cross of Christ, the middle of the fallen and preserved world of God, for us that is the end of the story of paradise.<sup>34</sup>

The tree of life achieves its full significance through Bonhoeffer's eschatological interpretation. Now, persons can reach for life and receive it from the tree on which Christ died, which stands at the center of life. The cross occupies the center of life, but it is still limit for women and men. Only Christ occupied the cross, dying on it so that persons might come to it to receive true life. The cross restores the hope, the life which sinful humanity tries to seize as its own.

But here again, with the cross both center and limit as the tree of life, power receives its redefinition. Before the Fall, God, Adam and Eve lived in intimate self-giving relationship with

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<sup>33</sup> "He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life." Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-94.



each other. God gave Adam life, creating communion between creator and creature. God lovingly gave Adam new life with Eve so they might share life together. Self-giving for the other characterized every relationship between God, Adam and Eve. Then, with the Fall, Adam invaded God's and Eve's boundaries, and self-giving for the other became self-centered domination of the other. Now, Christ's selfless giving of himself on the cross for others makes possible again the same selfless service between the Christian community.

"Power" is restored to its former terms--all because of the power of the Cross. In this way, Bonhoeffer's theological interpretation of creation and fall is within the tradition of the theologia crucis. The cross stands in the center of life, transforming sin's distorted terms of power to their original connotation. But the power of the cross would not be understood in its fullness unless one identified the ethical interpretation of creation and sin as Bonhoeffer did in his interpretation of Genesis 1-3.

Unless one recognizes the nature of God's power as selfless giving to and for the other, as Christ did on the cross, and unless one sees the nature of sin's power as self-centered objectivization of the other, our present understanding of "power" in the world will go by unquestioned. The significance and meaning of the cross and of sin may be regained in a new, fresh and relevant way in contemporary Western culture by examining these theological categories by way of power analysis. Bonhoeffer showed how theological power analysis is possible in his theological interpretation of Genesis 1-3. Without his interpretation of the terms of power, we would remain blind to

our sinful and inaccurate presumptions about human power and its ramifications in the world today.

The cross of Jesus Christ as the center and limit of life--this imagery provides the key to understanding God's power and human power in the world. Bonhoeffer never departed from such theological thinking. Indeed, his famous words from prison in July, 1944 echo the words and concepts written at the university in 1932/33. He said,

The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his omnipotence and suffering.<sup>35</sup>

These well-known words achieve their full significance in light of Bonhoeffer's theological concepts in Creation and Fall. The cross stands at the outer limit of life because the world has pushed it there. However, God remains in the center of life, allowing the cross to be rejected and edged out of human life. This is the theologia crucis at its height and then it comes down to the end. This is the theologia crucis at its height. The language of paradox--limit and center--applies perfectly to the cross here. Yet we know that it is not paradoxical--that is, left in unresolved contradiction--because we know Bonhoeffer understood "limit" and "middle" in terms of one another. Further, this is the essence of the power of the cross. Despite

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<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 360, 361. (Emphasis added).

modern humanity's rejection of the cross, God's power is ever present in his self-giving on the cross for others. His power is in giving himself away in loving relationship for others, not in marking off inviolable space in the center of life.<sup>36</sup> Despite all human effort, the cross remains in the middle, even though it stands on the edge or limit of human life, barely visible and seemingly insignificant.

If one examines Bonhoeffer's interpretation of creation and fall in terms of power analysis, then a new definition of human and divine power becomes possible. Giving oneself to and for the other in love is the essence of God's power. Selfless, mutual relationship between people is the redeemed ethical definition of power made possible through the God's power pro nobis on the cross. Self-centered, dominating objectivization of others is

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<sup>36</sup> This is exactly what Bonhoeffer is after when he says in his prison letter of July 1944, "The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 361. (Emphasis added).

Although Bonhoeffer does extol the intellectual development of philosophy and religion from the Middle Ages on and he heralds their contribution in making a path toward the world's "coming of age," he is making a theological statement of the order of the theologia crucis and its significance has not been sufficiently appreciated.

According to this theological letter Christ's cross occupies the center and limit of life. One must keep in mind what he said at the conclusion of this particular letter: "This [the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness] will probably be the starting-point for our 'secular' interpretation." Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis underlies all his statements about a world come of age and the progress of history. If one does not recognize this in its fulness in Bonhoeffer's letter of July 16, 1944, then the sinful character of modern humanity is totally missed. Now, as then, the creature tries to push the tree out of the center, out on the edge of life. But Bonhoeffer shows how God remains at the center while the tree of life, the cross, occupies the outer limit of life.

the sinful ethical definition of power. Even something so seemingly insignificant as an understanding of power as something to strive for, something one can obtain, holds within it sinful assumptions. The nature of power is duplex, given its social definition, according to Bonhoeffer. Thanks to his sapient and sensitive interpretation, we not only have a way toward a fresh understanding of divine and human power in the world, the cross takes on totally new significance and definition--all by way of a lonely, insignificant tree.

### Conclusions

Bonhoeffer wanted to find a way to discuss theological concepts in a non-religious way. He was convinced the Church and theology needed to find a new language. Too much time has been spent grieving over, or being frustrated with, the incomplete nature of Bonhoeffer's provocative ideas, overlooking the new language which already lies inherently within the structure of his theology. Power analysis not only yields a new view into Bonhoeffer's thought, but a viable alternative for understanding and talking about divine and human power in the late twentieth century. Such a schema for theological thought, discussion, and action is timely if not mandated.

But what is fascinating is the reflexive quality of the concept of power for Bonhoeffer. Not only is power analysis appropriate to Bonhoeffer's theology as a whole, it arises from within the structure of his categories of thought. In this case in Creation and Fall, creation and sin were revealed in a striking light, in socio-ethical terms. Sin is reintroduced into contemporary religious and non-religious thought, discussion and

action as a reality with which to contend. Whether or not the church or society at large heeds the convicting challenge is one thing. But the fact that Bonhoeffer issues such a challenge to his succeeding generations cannot be disputed and should not be ignored.

As with any other scheme, Bonhoeffer leaves us with questions and problems which need to be resolved. For example, because Bonhoeffer's concept of power is social at its base, does this mean it is confined to anthropology to the exclusion of the environment? The answer to this is no. Although Bonhoeffer does not address ecological issues explicitly in his theology, and how the creature is related to the creation, the categories of his thought lend themselves fully to a "creation" theology. Given the nature of power which is defined in terms of the cross, persons are to live in thoughtful, giving, loving relation to the earth. Human attitude and actions are defined in reference to the creation God has given to humanity as a gift to be prized and preserved.

Secondly, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of sin as a misuse of power that manifests itself in terms of domination, objectification, and aggression appears to smack of sexism. At first glance this is the case. On the one hand, it is to Bonhoeffer's detriment that he did not perceive nor discuss sin as self-abnegation, as is a more accurate and relevant interpretation of sin for many people.<sup>37</sup> This must be admitted to be lacking in

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<sup>37</sup> Gregory Jones in his paper, "The Cost of Forgiveness: Bonhoeffer on Grace, Christian Community, and the Politics of Worldly Discipleship" says that Bonhoeffer identifies pride as the root of all sin in his two works Spiritual Care and Life Together. Jones does an excellent job showing how Bonhoeffer does not treat self-abnegation as sin. The Sixth International Bonhoeffer Conference "Bonhoeffer's Legacy for the Future: Responsibility in a New World," New York, Union Theological

his theology. However, one must remember Bonhoeffer's duplex notion of power and the far-reaching ramifications of those meanings. To say the sinful definition of power is domination is to point the finger at the one who is guilty of this sin. In other words, sin manifests itself locally and personally. It would be wrong to universalize his definition of sinful power and apply it to those whose error lies elsewhere. The point with Bonhoeffer is that he was identifying the flagrant ethical misuse and abuse of power he was witnessing in his corner of the world and holding the relevant persons accountable according to this definition.<sup>38</sup>

One must avoid the temptation to universalize Bonhoeffer's description of the power of sin because sin can ethically manifest itself in many different ways. Further, the redeemed notion of power as selfless giving of oneself in relation

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Seminary, August 20, 1992, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> In a section of her essay, "Bonhoeffer's Picture of Women", Renate Bethge points out that Bonhoeffer never "had or gave the feeling to a woman that he, as a man, was superior to her." In her essay, Bethge depicts the strong role women played at that time in Germany in the home and in Nazi society. While she admits Bonhoeffer wrote some things about women that surprises her, she affirms his basic respect for women. She says, " . . . I get angry when I read dialogues in the many fiction and film manuscripts about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his family where the men . . . talk down to the women in a teaching manner and when the women are described as simple and frightened. As a matter of fact, the women were cunning and strong, never showing fear towards the Nazis, hardly even to each other, in order to keep up the spirit. They, as women were, even more outspoken and straightforward to the Nazis than the men. They had no jobs to lose and as women enjoyed a certain fool's license which they all used, . . . Renate Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Picture of Women", Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers, (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), pp. 197, 198. Bethge's helpful description of women at that time in Germany evidences key differences in self-identity between women at that time Germany and many women today in the United States. This helps us evaluate the charge that Bonhoeffer's definition of sin does not apply to those who consider self-abnegation an accurate definition.



with/for another does not assume sheepish, self-deprecating, apologetic behavior. Service does not connote denial of oneself in a negative way. The need for a redefinition of service and selflessness may very well be warranted. One need only look at Jesus' life and teachings to see the perfect example of selfless giving of oneself for others. However, Jesus was bold, prophetic, strong and incomparably courageous. These terms must be included in a graceful understanding of power as selfless service.

The circularity of sin's ethical power is inevitable unless a diacritical point is established by which persons may critique their personal assumptions, definitions, speech and actions. One could start to establish such a point with an inspection of the meanings surrounding "power" and "service" in society today. It would be better first to take a long look at the lonely, blood-stained tree standing on the edge of the world. This is the theological legacy Bonhoeffer leaves the present generation. It is the ethical mandate society cannot ignore any longer and the power from which new definitions will emerge.

The dialectical unity between prayer and earthiness was the fascinating secret of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spirituality.

Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, pp. 283-84.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A REDEFINITION AND A MODEL OF POWER:  
THE ARCAINE DISCIPLINEIntroduction

Up to this point we have looked to Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis as the locus for Bonhoeffer's thoughts on divine and human power. We have seen how his understanding of God, humanity, and sin are all bound up with the dialectical concept of power as this power is defined according to Christ's passion on the cross. Now, with a better understanding of the specific nature of power's sociality, i.e., power as selfless, sacrificial giving of oneself in relationship with and for the other person, we move to examine the arcane discipline as a concrete model of power, a specific framework by which Bonhoeffer's redefinition may be weighed and measured.

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, a two-part definition of divine and human power is present in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological thought, characterized by the following "movement": first, a reversal of terms where Bonhoeffer exchanges a powerful image of God for a weak, powerless one; he exchanges a weak humanity for a strong one. This is the first level of the definition, and it is an overt, clear exchange; second, a redefinition of terms where the hidden meaning associated with the new images of God and humanity is brought to bear on the new terms. What Bonhoeffer means by a weak God, what he means by a strong humanity is examined in light of the cross, which gives content to the new definitions.

This chapter seeks to determine the full meaning of Bonhoeffer's understanding of God's presence and human autonomy in dialectical terms of power by looking to the 'arcane discipline,' demonstrating thereby that the same "movement" or material content occurs in Bonhoeffer's model of power as was true in his definition. We shall examine the ingenious way he linked eschatology with ethics so that we have a new paradigm, a new model for understanding the Church's power in a modern world. This "discipline" unfolds as an ethical model of power, and it eventually leads us back to reexamine the project as a whole, to see if Bonhoeffer's redefinition is substantiated, coherent and ethically viable in today's world.

#### I. The Relationship between the Non-Religious Interpretation and the Arcane Discipline

Bonhoeffer was concerned with the way the church would look and sound in a modern, "religionless" age. He pursued this line of inquiry in his first theological letter from prison:

. . . [i]f our final judgment must be that the western form of Christianity, too, was only a preliminary stage to a complete absence of religion, what kind of situation emerges for us, for the church? . . . The questions to be answered would surely be: What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? . . . What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation? Does the secret discipline, . . . take on a new importance here?<sup>1</sup>

In grappling with the contours of the church in the forthcoming generations Bonhoeffer mentioned the notion of a secret or arcane

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 280, 281.

discipline as a way to help the church maintain a right identity and relationship in and with the world. Although he was not able to explicate fully the potential significance of this "discipline" due to his circumstances, he did describe what he meant by it in the baptismal address he wrote for his godson. He said:

our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action . . .<sup>2</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, prayer and action in the service of others would constitute the parameters of Christianity for a new generation of Christians. But what exactly did he mean by this hidden discipline, this call to prayer and righteous action? Eberhard Bethge offered a very helpful explanation, considering the wider context of Bonhoeffer's theology as it had developed up to that time:

Everything presses now toward those passages in which Bonhoeffer speaks of the mystery of a 'participation in the suffering of God on this earth', . . . Bonhoeffer describes this central mystery by the term 'arcane discipline', referring to that part of the sharing . . . that is concerned with the 'worship of God' . . . this is where we have statements about silence and invisibility, about the way in which the just man prays and acts, and about the difference between the ultimate and the penultimate . . . he means . . . that when the Gospel is preached the relationship between God's Word and his world is not an obvious thing and cannot be established artificial-

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<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ibid.*, p. 300; cf. pp. 281, 286. The only letters from prison where Bonhoeffer uses the phrase 'arcane discipline' are the ones of April 30, and May 5, 1944 and the Baptismal address for Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge on May 18, 1944.

ly or by a trick. The invention of new words achieves nothing."<sup>3</sup>

This entreaty to take the "secret discipline" more seriously involves taking a second look at two things, which for Bonhoeffer, formed a dialectic--prayer and "righteous" action in the world.<sup>4</sup> How do we know these two factors comprise the discipline Bonhoeffer was pointing to? How do we know he was not referring primarily or exclusively to a new liturgy, or, in fact, to its dismissal? We know because:

It would be a total misunderstanding of Bonhoeffer to imagine that in the realization of his worldly interpretation there would no longer be any community gathered for worship, so that the Word, the Sacrament and the community could be simply replaced by caritas. The self-sacrifice of the Church in his non-religious interpretation, which Bonhoeffer was thinking of, both for it and for himself, is not, then, to be at all associated with the loss of identity. It is precisely this that is to be re-won.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Bonhoeffer was not trying to do away with traditional forms of Christianity. The church exists in relationship with a modern, secular world. Bethge clarified this relationship as he described its relation to the "non-religious interpretation" of Biblical concepts:

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<sup>3</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pp. 784-86.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Larry Rasmussen identifies the dialectic in Bonhoeffer between the hidden discipline (characterized by religionless worship in a secular age) and "doing justice among men." in Dietrich Bonhoeffer--His Significance Among North Americans, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 785.



"The starting-point of his thinking [about the non-religious interpretation] is characteristically linked with his interest in an 'arcane discipline', i.e. in the constant relationship between the interpreter and the Lord, whose power lies in his very powerlessness. This approach has not, on the whole, been accepted in theological discussion, but it raises immediately the problem of the identity of the Christian as soon as he begins to see the extent of his identification with the world. If, then, non-religious interpretation means identification, then arcane discipline is the guarantee of an identity."<sup>6</sup>

With the identity of the Christian in the world at stake, Bonhoeffer set out to "guarantee" that identity by talking about a kind of discipline. Prayer and action, thus, constitute the secure parameters of Christianity by which a new generation of Christians might understand their relationship in and with the world.

We saw in chapter two how the Christian identity revolves around the notion of human autonomy or power. We found human autonomy in Ethics discussed in terms of freely chosen, responsible acts for others in an increasingly godless world. Thus, a social concept is at the heart of the non-religious interpretation, and it is characterized in terms of a relationship between "the interpreter and the Lord, whose power lies in his very powerlessness." God's weakness figured in as the cornerstone motif in his description of the modern person's identity in the world.

Bonhoeffer's expanded anthropological vision in Ethics made room for Christian and non-Christian alike. However, now that he had set some terms by which the modern identity might understand itself, he tried now in the prison letters to set out

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<sup>6</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 783. (Emphasis added).

clear parameters by which the Christian, the Church, might maintain its identity aright. As Bethge said, he looked for the terms of a "guarantee" of sorts that would respect the identity of the autonomous person, but in the light of a God whose power "lies in his very powerlessness." We turn now to see how Bonhoeffer envisioned this identity to be preserved and guaranteed with the "arcane discipline" and the role eschatology played in such a scheme.

## II. The Relationship Between the Arcane Discipline and Ethics

Although some Bonhoeffer scholars negate the presence of a strong eschatological emphasis in Bonhoeffer,<sup>7</sup> the German pastor indicated otherwise, particularly in the Letters and Papers from Prison<sup>8</sup>. In one of the prison letters he demonstrated such an interest:

The time between Easter and Ascension has always been particularly important to me. Our gaze is already directed to the last thing of all, but we still have our tasks, our joys and our sorrows on this earth and the power of living is granted to us by Easter. I . . . want to go this way with Maria, quite prepared for the last thing, for eternity, and yet wholly present for the task, the beauties and the

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<sup>7</sup> Such as Heinrich Ott, Reality and Faith, trans. A.A. Morrison (London: Lutterworth Press, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Clements, op. cit., pp. 186-197 for a helpful discussion of Bultmann's eschatological emphasis and how it relates to Bonhoeffer's christology. The 'secret discipline' figures in as a key eschatological component according to Ronald Gregor Smith.

L. Gregory Jones, argues persuasively for the clear presence of this thematic in Bonhoeffer's theology, even in his early work, in his recent seminar paper The Cost of Forgiveness: Bonhoeffer on Grace, Christian Community, and the Politics of Worldly Discipleship, presented at the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, August, 1992, esp. p. 23.

troubles of this earth. Only on this way can we be completely happy and completely at peace together.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the christological question which lay at the heart of his question "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" is, in part, an eschatological one. In laying out Christ's claim on a world-come-of-age, Bonhoeffer expressed his hope in the eschatological fulfillment of the world, the 'restoration of all things,' as the new creation which shall be achieved through the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> We miss out on an aspect of his theology which is integral to his overall theological perspective if we do not pause and note the significance of his eschatological vision and what he meant by it.

Eberhard Bethge spoke of the "hidden discipline" in the following fashion:

. . . in the arcanum there takes place the life events of faith, praise, thanksgiving and the fellowship of the communion table, and these are not interpreted outwardly . . . Christ, the center of this arcane discipline, continually sends out the 'initiated' into their participation in the life of the world, promising them that he encounters and questions them there.<sup>11</sup>

The interface between worship and action in the world is clear. But how is the Church to understand this partially hidden form of spirituality? Bethge takes up this concern directly: "They can make the sacrifice of being silent and incognito because they

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<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 246. Also, cf. p. 272 where he said, "How can people stand earthly tensions if they know nothing of the tension between heaven and earth?"

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 170, 171.

<sup>11</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 788.

trust the Holy Spirit, who knows and brings on the time of proclamation."<sup>12</sup> With the concept of the "secret discipline" Bonhoeffer set forth a provocative dimension to his eschatological drive. We turn now to see how two themes which surfaced in Ethics--the "ultimate and the penultimate" and "conformation" to Christ--bear on this provocative idea.

#### A. The Ultimate and Penultimate

Geffrey Kelly, in his book Liberating Faith: Bonhoeffer's Message for Today<sup>13</sup>, made a connection between the arcane discipline and the theme of the ultimate-penultimate in his Ethics:

The discipline of the secret in the first instance, is alternated with the distinction Bonhoeffer made in his Ethics between penultimate and ultimate. These are terms employed by Bonhoeffer in place of the more familiar 'natural-supernatural' distinction of traditional church dogmatics. Because the Christian belongs wholly to this world, after the manner of Christ incarnate, the penultimate includes a whole-hearted embracing of all human values. But this penultimate living is, in turn, conditioned by the ultimate. Bonhoeffer was careful that the concept of the ultimate should not be made to intrude imperiously on the penultimate situations in which the Christian can only wait and hope for insight into the full meaning of an event shrouded in historical ambivalence. It is on such occasions that Bonhoeffer counseled and practiced a respectful silence that is akin to the 'discipline of the secret' mentioned in the letters.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. In his discussion of what Bonhoeffer meant by the arcane discipline Bethge pointed to the pneumatological significance therein. Cf. the quotation found on p. 202 of this study.

<sup>13</sup> Geffrey Kelly, Liberating Faith: Bonhoeffer's Message for Today, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), pp. 134-35.

<sup>14</sup> Kelly, ibid., p. 135.

Kelly joins Larry Rasmussen<sup>15</sup> in pointing out the way Bonhoeffer combines eschatology and ethics in connection with the arcane discipline. This is an ingenious way of maintaining the difference between God and persons so that an ultimate identification is not made and yet a false separation is not evoked either.

Bonhoeffer explained what he meant by his concept of ultimate and penultimate:

What is the penultimate? It is everything that precedes the ultimate, everything that precedes the justification of the sinner by grace alone . . . It is at the same time everything which follows the ultimate and yet again precedes it . . . the penultimate . . . does not determine the ultimate; it is the ultimate which determines the penultimate . . . Concretely, two things are called penultimate in relation to the justification of the sinner by grace, namely being man and being good.<sup>16</sup>

He went on to say that while it is only on the basis of the ultimate (justification) that we can know what it is to be human (the penultimate), the relationship is such that personhood precedes justification. In this relationship, the penultimate does not rob the ultimate of its freedom; it is the freedom of the ultimate that validates the penultimate.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rasmussen discusses this in his chapter "An Ethic of the Cross," Rasmussen, op. cit., pp. 144-173.

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 133-34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 134. The definition of "ultimate-penultimate" above, as well as a few of the statements below on "the preparing of the way" originated in my S.T.M. thesis on Bonhoeffer, "Towards a New Spirituality in North America: The Import of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Dialectical Model of Spirituality", S.T.M., Yale Divinity School, (1989) pp. 29-31.

L. Gregory Jones demonstrates in his paper, "The Cost of Forgiveness: . . ." three dimensions to Bonhoeffer's ultimate-penultimate motif: first, the ordering of the term--the ultimate is primary, the penultimate is to be understood in the light of

In this formula the emphasis on ethical behavior comes to the fore. Action which fosters more humane conditions in life prepares the way for God's grace to take hold in humanity.<sup>18</sup> But, with his emphasis on human realization of the penultimate, one might suspect that Bonhoeffer is suggesting a concept of grace in which human effort must precede God's message in order for it to take hold in the lives of men and women. This is not so. Bonhoeffer affirms that "[g]race must in the end prepare and make level its own way and grace alone must ever anew render possible the impossible." He went on to say, " . . . all this does not release us from our obligation to prepare the way for the coming of grace, and to remove whatever obstructs it and makes it difficult."<sup>19</sup> Rather than questioning the ultimacy of grace, Bonhoeffer asserted the necessity of responsible human action in the world as a preparation of the ultimate act of God's grace to occur.

There is a tendency for one to argue for the ultimacy of God's grace not so much to praise the finality of God's mercy

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the ultimate; second, the ultimate is the temporally final word of Christ's forgiveness that precedes the penultimate way that leads to repentance; and third, a more socio-political meaning--whereas we cannot compel the imparting of God's forgiving grace (the ultimate), we must still prepare the way (the penultimate) through concrete acts of repentance. cf. pp. 23-27.

<sup>18</sup> Articulating what Bonhoeffer meant by 'grace' in his discussion on the Sermon on the Mount, Glen Stassen refers to the "shape of grace" as "that which delivers from mechanisms of bondage into a community of inclusive compassion. We are delivered into the light of God's presence, peace among nations, compassionate justice for the poor and hungry, knowledge of the Lord's forgiveness and redemption." Glen H. Stassen, "Grace and Deliverance in the Sermon on the Mount," Review and Expositor, Vol. 89, no. 2, Spring 1992, p. 237. Stassen makes a convincing argument for interpreting the Sermon on the Mount as "delivering grace", overcoming its past interpretation as an impossible ideal.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 136.



toward humanity, but to examine the possibility of human exemption from responsibility in allowing God's grace to become real for others. Bonhoeffer depicted this with a telling illustration:

For him who is cast into utter shame, desolation, poverty and helplessness, it is difficult to have faith in the justice and goodness of God . . . To allow the hungry man to remain hungry would be to blasphemy against God and one's neighbor, for what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one's neighbor.<sup>20</sup>

The preparation of the way for God's grace does not consist in esoteric, intellectual exercises. Bonhoeffer clearly suggested it consists in concrete actions done with and for those around us. With the profound notion of the ultimate and penultimate, he showed the way to understand God's forgiveness and human responsibility without hegemony, demonstrating thereby the place and meaning of both in a contemporary world. We shall see more fully how this scheme relates to the "secret discipline" as a concrete way modern Christians may prepare the way for God's graceful presence in the present age.

#### B. Conformation to Christ

In his section entitled "Ethics as Formation" Bonhoeffer spoke concretely of a way to understand how Christ is present and "takes shape" among us today. He said,

The word 'formation' arouses our suspicion. We are sick and tired of Christian programmes and of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 136, 137.

thoughtless and superficial slogan of what is called 'practical' Christianity as distinct from 'dogmatic' Christianity . . . [t]he word 'formation', therefore, must be taken in quite a different sense from that to which we are accustomed. And in fact the Holy Scriptures speak of formation in a sense which is at first entirely unfamiliar to us. Their primary concern is not with the forming of a world by means of plans and programmes. Whenever they speak of forming they are concerned only with the one form which has overcome the world, the form of Jesus Christ. Formation can only come from this form. But here again it is not a question of applying directly to the world the teaching of Christ or what are referred to as Christian principles, so that the world might be formed in accordance with these. On the contrary, formation comes only by being drawn in into the form of Jesus Christ. It comes only as formation in His likeness, as conformation with the unique form of Him who was made man, was crucified and rose again.<sup>21</sup>

Nowhere is Bonhoeffer more dynamic in his description of the way Christ is present in the world than in his description of the way he takes shape within persons, by formation. But he does not stop there. Lest the modern Christian think one can achieve such formation on his or her own he said,

This is not achieved by dint of efforts 'to become like Jesus', which is the way in which we usually interpret it. It is achieved only when the form of Jesus Christ itself works upon us in such a manner that it moulds our form in its own likeness (Gal. 4.19). Christ remains the only giver of forms. It is not Christian men who shape the world with their ideas, but it is Christ who shapes men in conformity with Himself.<sup>22</sup>

To make his point clear he forwarded the notion of "conformation." The present Christ seeks visibility, he does not remain hidden. And Bonhoeffer put concrete definition to the visible form of this christological presence in the world by elaborating

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<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 80. (emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 80.

on the notion of conformation. This presence is beyond imitation,<sup>23</sup> and it is perhaps the most dynamic way he came to speak of how Christ is for us, pro nobis, in a world come of age.

At least four things stand out in this concept of conformation and how it relates to the arcane discipline. First, Bonhoeffer emphasized that conformation to Christ does not mean taking on an alien form, but persons are transformed into their own proper form.<sup>24</sup> This is another provocative way Bonhoeffer was able to emphasize God's gracious initiative with humanity without eclipsing or taking away from human autonomy in any way. Formation to Christ involves persons being freed for their own true form. This highly personal and dynamic aspect of Bonhoeffer's understanding of who Jesus Christ is for us reveals a basic intimacy between God and individuals through the Mediator of forms which respects human autonomy at its base.

Secondly, we see how Bonhoeffer is able to discuss the Lutheran notion of life coram Deo in a new way, in non-religious terms. God's gracious initiative in the life of the Christian is preserved because ultimately, human existence involves a passivity at its base. As Bonhoeffer said, ". . . formation comes only by being drawn in into the form of Jesus Christ . . ."<sup>25</sup> The form of Jesus Christ "molds our form," working itself upon us.<sup>26</sup> This is none other than an existence which "under-

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<sup>23</sup> "The form of Jesus Christ takes form in man. Man does not take on an independent form of his own, but what gives him form and what maintains him in the new form is always solely the form of Jesus Christ Himself. It is therefore not a vain imitation or repetition of Christ's own form but Christ's form itself which takes form in man." Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

goes" and a provocative way to understand how Christians in a modern world live in the presence of God, under divine guidance.

Thirdly, Bonhoeffer emphasized that conformation takes place within the Church, not in everyone. As we shall see later in more depth, it involves a "joining in the Messianic suffering of God in the world." Larry Rasmussen described the contemporary application of such a restriction:

Arcane discipline means that worship in a world come of age is not for everyone. It is for small groups of committed Christians who comprise an intense community on the basis of their intense loyalty to Christ. Their expression of the meaning of that loyalty is communicated with one another in worship, but not to and with all. Worship as arcane discipline is not for the streets, the posters, or the mass media. It is certainly not Hollywood Bowl and drive-in Easter sunrise services, nor Sunday East Room exercises in American civil religion in the White House, nor Astrodome rallies of religiosity. It is not bumper-sticker and slick paper Christianity. If Bonhoeffer were to have his way, the church would begin by giving up its property for the sake of the needy, would be devout in its practice of disciplines, and demanding in its stipulations for participation. It would be a poor and apparently powerless church that would dispense costly grace, rather than a rich and privileged church that offers cheap grace.<sup>27</sup>

Bonhoeffer envisioned the arcane discipline to take shape in "small bands" of followers.<sup>28</sup> This was yet another way he set forth a "guarantee" for Christians and their identity in a modern world.

Lastly, by delineating conformation as he did, Bonhoeffer showed precisely how ethics as a discipline is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a thoroughly social point of

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<sup>27</sup> Rasmussen, op. cit., pp. 68-69. Also quoted in Gregory Jones, "The Cost of Forgiveness" op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 83.

departure, supplanting Christian ethics as a programmatic enterprise at its base. The Church as the body of Christ, then, takes on an even more profound connotation as the concrete, personal way Christ is present for others. He said:

What matters in the Church is not religion but the form of Christ, and its taking form amidst a band of men. If we allow ourselves to lose sight of this, even for an instant, we inevitably relapse into that programme-planning for the ethical or religious shaping of the world, which was where we set out from . . . The point of departure for Christian ethics is the body of Christ, the form of Christ in the form of the Church, and formation of the Church in conformity with the form of Christ . . . For indeed it is not written that God became an idea, a principle, a programme, a universally valid proposition or a law, but that God became man.<sup>29</sup>

With his notions of the ultimate-penultimate and conformation, Bonhoeffer demonstrated a new way to understand the relationship between God and the Christian community in an increasingly secular world. These novel terms point to the new theological language he envisioned for a new generation of Christians, but more importantly, they laid the foundation for a concrete ethical formula by which the modern Christian identity and subsequent action might be measured and preserved--prayer and righteous action in the world.

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<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, pp. 84, 85.

### III. Prayer and Righteous Action as a Guarantee of the Christian Identity in a 'World Come of Age'

#### A. Prayer as Limit

Bonhoeffer used the language of center and limit, middle and boundary at different points in his theology. At one point in a prison letter he said, "I've come to be doubtful of talking about any human boundaries (is even death, which people now hardly fear, and is sin, which they now hardly understand, still a genuine boundary today?)<sup>30</sup> In this context, "human boundaries" represent the point at which human knowledge or strength fail and persons look to God out of weakness, ambiguity or simply laziness. "Boundary" is understood as weakness which is exploited.

Whereas the context for Bonhoeffer was one in which human limit represented intellectual sloth or physical weakness, the context for many Westerners today is the opposite--human limitations have been broken and crossed in so many ways that they have come to represent meaningless, transgressed signposts. Prayer is one of the limits which is commonly transgressed with no looking back. Bonhoeffer's attitude toward the concept of boundaries and limits in Creation and Fall is instructive here. For him, the "other" was discussed in social, relational terms as a graceful limit, a person to be served. His consequent thoughts and the legacy bequeathed to us in his notion of arkandisziplin, focused as they are on the place of prayer and righteous action in the world, lead us to new understandings of discipline, responsibility, and limits.

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<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 282.



Bonhoeffer believed prayer was at the center of the Christian life, both in a world-come-of-age and in every age.<sup>31</sup> When one reads his thoughts on the topic of prayer, whether in his earlier works or in the later works, one cannot help but notice his express intent to discuss it in a way which leads to bold action. He could not have been more clear about its significance in the letters from prison:

. . . our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action . . . <sup>32</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, prayer and action in the service of others will constitute the parameters of Christianity for a new generation of Christians. Until now, the political implications of prayer have gone largely unmentioned. Such an analysis has been sorely lacking, for Bonhoeffer envisioned prayer as a key to the Christian identity in the coming generations.

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<sup>31</sup> Jones argues that Bonhoeffer's reference to prayer in his Baptismal letter to Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge should be understood in an "expansive rather than restrictive terms". In other words, the sacraments, proclamation and Bible study should somehow figure into his concept of "prayer." While we agree with Jones that Bonhoeffer did have more than prayer in mind in his thoughts on the arcane discipline and how the "mysteries" of the Christian faith could best be preserved amidst an increasingly secular culture by it, at the same time, he had much to say about this singular aspect of Christian practice and identity. We will focus on this one aspect of his novel thought, given that it was such an essential, consistent theme throughout his life and theology.

<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 300.

## B. The Political Implications of Prayer

Bonhoeffer spoke of prayer throughout his writings. In The Cost of Discipleship he discussed prayer in his exegesis of the sixth chapter of Matthew.<sup>33</sup> By focusing first on the hiddenness of prayer, he went on to explicate the Lord's Prayer. Here we received some first clues as to the political implications of prayer.<sup>34</sup> First, prayer puts into practice the real relationship we have with God. Prayer is a social event, between follower and God through Christ, the Mediator. Throughout his discussion Bonhoeffer spoke of prayer in relational terms only. Prayer exercises the relationship existing between the Creator and His creatures. It is the relationship of a child with his or her Father.<sup>35</sup>

Prayer reminds and reinforces individuals of their "place" in relationship with God. This relationship is nothing other than living in God's presence, before God, coram Deo, and prayer

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<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 180-187.

<sup>34</sup> In our recent interview, Bethge stressed the political implication of prayer for Bonhoeffer at the time of his writing The Cost of Discipleship in Hitler's Germany: "When you say, I pray to God, that means I pray to this God of the Bible and not the other gods. This dynamic was of course very much alive in Hitler's time . . . . I think Dietrich was very much aware of that too--that Christ never could mean anything beside or in addition to the first commandment . . . . Therefore, you have the rediscovery of the Psalms, for instance, because the Psalms are also fighting language. Every prayer means an Absage to other gods. Every prayer to Yahweh means a "no" to pagan gods, the stronger gods, the gods with whole armies on their side." In this way, the Barmen Declaration was an absolutely clear indication that Hitler was not God but Christ alone is God. It always gave a biblical sentence first, then a positive statement, then the negative, "we reject." Thus, "every positive prayer to God the Almighty is claiming that we know where "almightiness" is and we know where wrong "almightiness" is." Appendix I, pp. 316-17.

<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 180-183.

captures the intimacy of this relationship. It places one in a position of being open before God, where one is malleable, open to change.<sup>36</sup> In his discussion on the hiddenness of prayer in The Cost of Discipleship, Bonhoeffer spoke of the essence of Christian prayer as petition. This was so for him because:

How are we to be protected from ourselves, and our own premeditations? . . . The only way is by mortifying our own wills which are always obtruding themselves. And the only way to do this is by letting Christ alone reign in our hearts, by surrendering our wills completely to him, by living in fellowship with Jesus and by following him. Then we can pray that his will may be done, the will of him who knows our needs before we ask. Only then is our prayer certain, strong and pure. And then prayer is really and truly petition. The child asks of the Father whom he knows. Thus the essence of Christian prayer is not general adoration, but definite, concrete petition.<sup>37</sup>

Basically, prayer before God inculcates the practice and belief that one can be vulnerable, open with God, because one exists fundamentally in relationship with God.

Secondly, Bonhoeffer stressed confession and forgiveness of sins in prayer. Citing the injunction, "Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors," he makes it all too clear that forgiveness without confession constitutes "cheap grace" (billige Gnade). He says,

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<sup>36</sup> In his discussion on prayer as undemonstrative action, John Matthews points out that though prayer is a form of action for Bonhoeffer, it is primarily undemonstrative in that it "places the believer in the right posture before God, the neighbor, and self." Matthews, op. cit., p. 90. Cf. Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, p. 181.

In his discussion of prayer that is informed by Scripture in Life Together, Bonhoeffer said, "Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, and, what is more, to accept it in one's personal situation, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations." Bonhoeffer, Life Together, pp. 84-85.

<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 182-83.

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins . . . [c]heap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.<sup>38</sup>

The emphasis on confession and repentance allows persons to avoid self-deception. Therein, persons cannot escape the harsh reality that they are guilty of wrong and that their attitudes and behavior must be held up for examination. For Bonhoeffer, forgiveness without repentance is not only dangerous but an illusion.<sup>39</sup> He hung his heart on the fact that "the preaching of forgiveness must always go hand-in-hand with the preaching of repentance."<sup>40</sup> Further, repentance and confession must be particular and concrete, lest one fall into a despair of genuine forgiveness or a smug assumption that "God forgives because that is God's business."<sup>41</sup>

As Bonhoeffer said, "Deceived and weakened, men felt that they were strong now that they were in possession of this cheap

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<sup>38</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 45, 47.

<sup>39</sup> We recall Bonhoeffer's concept of reality in Ethics with its christologically unified understanding of reality. There, he emphasized that unless the eye is "trained upon the true reality" in simplicity and wisdom, persons will constantly deceive themselves. He cited the confusion between what constitutes success and failure, death and life, idolization and contempt of others as some indications of how twisted values and ethics had become at that time in Nazi Germany under Hitler.

<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, p. 324.

<sup>41</sup> Bonhoeffer, Spiritual Care, p. 43. Cf. Gregory L. Jones, "The Cost of Forgiveness...", p. 14.

grace--whereas they had in fact lost the power to live the life of discipleship and obedience."<sup>42</sup> The deceived understanding of grace confuses the power of life (which he describes as discipleship and following) with weakness (which he describes as a selfish, objectivized understanding of grace).<sup>43</sup> We have already suggested the objectivizing process involved in sin's ethical event in Chapter Three, and we see Bonhoeffer using the same paradigm, the same language here again in The Cost of Discipleship. Confession and repentance, far from being a recommended practice for pious prayer, are ingredient to the nature of grace itself. If this human recognition, acknowledgement and confession of sin is not practiced, a prostituted understanding of grace and God's forgiveness occurs in the life and belief of the Christian and one is left in a position of self-centeredness rather than selflessness for others.

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<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, p. 59. See also p. 55 where he said, "Such a man knows that the call to discipleship is a gift of grace, and that the call is inseparable from the grace. But those who try to use this grace as a dispensation from following Christ are simply deceiving themselves."

<sup>43</sup> In his 1931 essay "Concerning the Christian Idea of God", Bonhoeffer discusses God's paradoxical essence in justification. Even at this early date, the young theologian pointed out the way in which persons are deceived--God's revelation appears as "foolish" and persons confuse strength and weakness: "That is the foolishness of the revelation of God and its paradoxical character--that just there, where the power of man has lapsed entirely, where man knows his own weakness, sinfulness, and consequently the judgment of God upon him, that just there God is already working in grace, that just and exactly there and only there is forgiveness, justification, restoration. There, where man himself no longer sees, God sees, and God alone works, in judgment and in grace. There, at the very limits of man, stands God, and when man can do nothing more, than God does all. The justification of the sinner--this is the self-proof of the sole authority of God." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Concerning the Christian Idea of God," Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften vol. III, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1960), p. 109. Cf. Geoffrey Kelly, "Revelation in Christ: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses, L. 1 (1974), p. 61.

The sinful understanding of grace, according to Bonhoeffer, sees grace as a reified object to possess, whereas the true understanding of grace, "costly grace" (teure Gnade), is described socially in terms of following God or discipleship. The "objectivization" of grace is described no more eloquently nor incisively than in his well-known description of cheap grace:

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be if it were not cheap?<sup>44</sup>

Grace is described materialistically as a reduced item for sale, as well as an infinite money reserve. The Christian who understands grace in a reified, static, asocial way is deceived. But once grace is understood as costly and accepted accordingly, the real, dynamic relationship between the individual and God is possible through discipleship. Once confession and repentance is left out, selfless intimate relationship is displaced by self-indulgent objectivization. Whereas sin objectifies and distorts, grace frees for relationship. We become free "for others" in the same way that Christ is pro nobis.

The key to note here is that confession of sin in prayer, while it continually restores the Christian to a right relationship with God (as follower), it also restores the Christian to

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<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, p. 45.



a right relationship with others. God's "ultimate" forgiveness paves the way, or, leads one into "penultimate" service with and for others. A self-aggrandizing or despondent attitude toward grace is shattered and living, loving relationship with God and others is restored.

Unfortunately, acknowledgement and confession of sin often is sacrificed in day to day life. But Bonhoeffer shows how confession is mistakenly seen as an unimportant limit which should be practiced out of traditional obligation rather than an essential aspect of autonomous living. The political implication of prayer, and the confession which is a non-negotiable part of it, serve to release one from a posture and stance of selfish concern to one of others-centered action. Indeed, through confession and forgiveness we are liberated for service to and among the lowly and needy.<sup>45</sup>

Intercession is the prime example of how political prayer can be. Regarding it, Bonhoeffer said:

I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others. There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as far as our side of it is concerned. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. The struggle we undergo with our brother in intercession may be a hard

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<sup>45</sup> "Once a man has experienced the mercy of God in his life he will henceforth aspire only to serve. The proud throne of the judge no longer lures him; he wants to be down below with the lowly and the needy, because that is where God found him." Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p. 94; see Greg Jones, op. cit., p. 18.

one, but that struggle has the promise that it will gain its goal.<sup>46</sup>

The political ramifications are clear. The act of interceding for another de facto begins the process of breaking down barriers which separate one person or group from another. While prayer is all too often neglected as a valid topic for theological analysis, Bonhoeffer shows here and in his later work how prayer transforms human hate, enmity, tension and conflict into a completely different reality. It inevitably causes one to see oneself in relation to the other person, even when that person is one's enemy. It begins the process of melting down barriers so that persons can see each other more realistically and truthfully.

Bonhoeffer offers a clear description of what he means when he speaks of intercessory prayer<sup>47</sup>:

Intercession should be seen from two aspects: as a human deed and as the divine will. In the first, the fact that the members of the church belong together is made manifest. A third person is drawn into my solitary relation with God, or rather, I move in intercession into the other man's place, when my prayer remains my own, but nevertheless springs from his distress and his need; I really enter into the other man, into his guilt and distress; I am afflicted by his sins and his infirmity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> The following discussion on intercessory prayer is derived from a very brief portion of an earlier dissertation by the author entitled, "Towards a New Spirituality in North America: The Import of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Dialectical Model of Spirituality", Unpublished S.T.M. Thesis, Yale Divinity School, 1989, pp. 14, 15, 16. On file in the Bonhoeffer Archives, Union Theological Seminary, New York, New York.

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, (London: Collins, 1963), p. 133.

Intercessory prayer, then, is a way one Christian may seriously enter into prayer with the other individual fully in mind, so that, in essence, the one praying replaces oneself with the needs, sufferings and situations of the other who is in mind. For Bonhoeffer, this way of "being for others" is one of the greatest strengths of the Church:

If we now consider intercession from God's standpoint, it is seen to be the individual's organization of himself to realize God's will for the other man, so that he may serve the realization of God's rule in the church. Here is where the meaning and strength of the corporate prayer of the church resides, as Luther speaks of it in the sermon on good works. In this corporate prayer God possesses his strongest means for organizing the whole church towards his purpose. The church recognizes itself in prayer as an instrument of his will and organizes itself accordingly in active obedience.<sup>49</sup>

Even as early as the late 1920's, Bonhoeffer was talking about prayer dialectically--as that which leads us into the world. And this was to become the "secret" of his spirituality, as Moltmann suggested. The relevance of such an understanding of prayer cannot be overestimated. Bonhoeffer's view on prayer leading one into the world stands in contradistinction from other "classical" spiritualities which suggest renunciation of the world and privatized forms of obedience to God. Bonhoeffer points out the relationship between our prayers and that which we do in external affairs, between God's ultimate act of justification and our penultimate actions of service with and for others. There is no dichotomy, and one is freed to view and practice prayer with an entirely new understanding. Thus, prayer is rejected as a pious exercise of egocentric request practiced in isolation from the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

world. Further, prayers become the direction, the motivation from which we discern the actions we are to be about in the world.

True prayer involves subjection of one's entire personal agenda to the more perfect wisdom of God through Jesus Christ. Thus, our prayers precede and accompany those types of work one does in the world before God, coram Deo. Not only is prayer itself a very real work which we perform through Jesus Christ, but it is the key force which leads us into informed action with those around us. Bonhoeffer extols prayer as the guardian of the church and the Christian's identity in a secular world for his coming generation.

By pausing to examine the meaning and ramifications associated with prayer for Bonhoeffer we have been able to see how he carried Luther's theology of the cross to new heights. Indeed, Luther made it clear that at the cross, all thoughts and understanding of God are done away, and new, paradoxical understandings come forth--God's wisdom appearing as foolishness in the world, God's strength appearing as weakness. By articulating prayer as part of a hidden or "secret" discipline, Bonhoeffer gave new, ethical terms to God's transcendent hiddenness. We remember that he struggled throughout his life with Barth's transcendent understanding of God, concluding that it was a noetic transcendentalism which emphasized God's detached freedom from the world. Bonhoeffer believed God is free for others, pro aliis, to such an extent that his presence could be understood as an ethical transcendence. The arcane discipline represents the ethical expression of that presence, God manifesting God's self in his justification of others on the cross, his forgiveness serving as the "ultimate" act which ushers in

"penultimate" action for others and with others. Prayer is the moment in which God's final authority or power is manifest in terms of a seemingly insignificant, hidden practice. It is a costly forgiveness, a costly grace as Bonhoeffer emphasized in The Cost of Discipleship, marked by confession and repentance. We turn now to see how this hidden form of God's power in the world manifests itself in ethical terms, in terms of "righteous action," in terms of service for others.

### C. "Righteous Action" in the World: Getting Terms Straight

The call to action today typically receives more attention than the call to prayer. This is understandable, for persons interested in Bonhoeffer's model of Christianity commonly seek to understand what kind of action constitutes "righteous" or "responsible" action in a given context. However, the hidden, "non-demonstrative" part of the dialectic--prayer--is skipped over, and the first tragic mistake is made. Bonhoeffer emphasized that prayer leads one into responsible action. We have seen thus far how, as the Christian's graceful limit, it prevents self-deception and provides insight into the true nature of grace. Indeed, God's hidden, powerful presence in the world was expressed by Bonhoeffer in terms of forgiveness, of justification. This is God's "ultimate" way of "being there for others," and as such it makes responsible action in the world possible. The ethical ramifications of prayer manifest themselves in "righteous action" for others. We turn now to see what Bonhoeffer meant by such action and how it differs from responsible, autonomous action by a world come of age.

In sketching out the parameters for a book<sup>50</sup> while he was in prison, Bonhoeffer made provocative statements about christological and ecclesiological power. We heard them earlier, and they have been foundational in our investigation of his thought. First, we know that Bonhoeffer believed christological power is grounded in Jesus' "being there for others."<sup>51</sup> Ecclesiological "power" is based on this Christological principle--"[t]he church is the church only when it exists for others . . . it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power."<sup>52</sup> "Being there for others" constitutes the social reality underlying power's meaning.

Further, Bonhoeffer was pressed throughout his life to understand the way God was and is present in the world. His lifelong query, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" aphoristically represented this concern. The cradle and the cross--the most human, mundane images--depict Christ's presence most clearly. And yet, this Incarnate presence is partially hidden and remains a mystery to human knowledge.<sup>53</sup> Given the incarnate, hidden presence of Christ in the world, Bonhoeffer made it clear in the letters from prison that God is in the center of life<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "Outline for a Book," Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 380-383.

<sup>51</sup> "His 'being there for others' . . . is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence." Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 381.

<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 382-83.

<sup>53</sup> See Bonhoeffer's Christmas letter of 1939 to the ordinands to see his Lutheran emphasis on the mystery of the incarnation. Bonhoeffer, True Patriotism, pp. 28-33.

<sup>54</sup> As one Bonhoeffer scholar said, "Bonhoeffer's interest in the arcani disciplina was the result of an intense passion to know God in the 'center of life,' not only at the boundaries." John Matthews, op. cit., p. 27.



It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously . . . to reserve some space for God; I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and goodness.<sup>55</sup>

And again, one month later in a letter from prison he says,

Here again, God is no stop-gap; he must be recognized at the centre of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the centre of life, and he certainly didn't 'come' to answer our unsolved problems. From the centre of life certain questions, and their answers, are seen to be wholly irrelevant . . . <sup>56</sup>

Bonhoeffer had a long-term interest in determining this partially hidden presence of Christ in the world, pursuing this quest with vigor in classical Lutheran form. These two rudimentary theological factors, Bonhoeffer's social understanding of divine presence and human autonomy or power as "being there for others," and the concern to articulate the hidden-yet-present God in the center of life--were at the crux of his interest in the arcane discipline. We turn now to examine them in more detail as well as to clarify the terms and meaning associated with what concretely constitutes "righteous action" in a world marked by autonomy.

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<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 282.

<sup>56</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 312.

## 1. The Principle of Vicarious Action

Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer spoke of this christological principle.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, as early as 1927 in Sanctorum Communio he articulated the parameters for the arcane discipline in strict conjunction with the principle of vicarious action:

Our being for one another now has to be actualized through the act of love. Three great possibilities for acting positively for one another are disclosed in the communion of saints: renunciatory, active work for our neighbor, prayers of intercession, and lastly the mutual granting of forgiveness of sins in God's name. With all of them it is a question of abandoning oneself 'for' one's neighbor, for his good, but with the readiness to do and bear everything in his stead, indeed if need be to sacrifice oneself for him, to act vicariously for him.<sup>58</sup>

Rather than suggest vicarious action as a single type of action performed for others, Bonhoeffer explained the breadth of such a principle by showing the varied ways in which selfless living may occur. More than ten years later, in the Ethics, he wrote about it during his third phase in the section on the structure of responsible living.<sup>59</sup> In non-religious terms he explained what he meant by it:

The fact that responsibility is fundamentally a matter of deputyship is demonstrated most clearly in those circumstances in which a man is directly obliged to act in the place of other men, for example as a

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<sup>57</sup> "Jesus Christ is for his brethren by standing in their place. Christ stands for his new humanity before God. But if that is the case, he is the new humanity. He stands vicariously where mankind should stand, by virtue of his pro me structure. Bonhoeffer, Christology, p. 48.

<sup>58</sup> Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, p. 130.

<sup>59</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 224-27.

father, as a statesman or as a teacher. The father acts for the children, working for them, caring for them, interceding, fighting and suffering for them. Thus in a real sense he is their deputy. He is not an isolated individual, but he combines in himself the selves of a number of human beings. Any attempt to live as though he were alone is a denial of the actual fact of his responsibility . . . No man can altogether escape responsibility, and this means that no man can avoid deputyship . . . Deputyship, and therefore also responsibility, lies only in the complete surrender of one's own life to the other man. Only the selfless man lives responsibly, and this means that only the selfless man lives.<sup>60</sup>

The christological principle of "being there for others," which came to be so significant in his late theology, was most clearly expressed in ethical terms as "deputyship."<sup>61</sup> Here, again, Bonhoeffer was talking about a selfless way of living which is focused on others.

In sketching a second chapter in his "Outline for a Book"<sup>62</sup> while in prison, Bonhoeffer made provocative statements about christological and ecclesiological power. He believed christological power is grounded in Jesus' "being there for others":

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<sup>60</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 224-25.

<sup>61</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 224-227. In his book The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ernst Feil points out that ". . . Bonhoeffer took up again the ideas of deputyship which had appeared in the concept of pro nobis from the christology course to Ethics. Yet he made a significant change: here he used the phrase 'for others,' substituting 'pro aliis' for 'pro nobis.' (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 93. Feil refers to the proposed second chapter outline of Bonhoeffer's "Outline for a Book" and the phrases "Jesus is there only for others" and "existence for others" as a case in point (Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 381. However, as we have seen above, Bonhoeffer discussed this "being there for others" as early as Sanctorum Communio, both with his explicit words on "being for one another" and with his concepts of vicarious action "with another" (miteinander) and "for another" (füreinander). My disagreement with Feil over this alleged "change" is more a semantic one than a substantive one, for the main point in the similar terminologies is that the Lutheran notion of Christ's action for us, pro nobis, is at the heart of Bonhoeffer's concern.

<sup>62</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 380-83.

Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. . . . His 'being there for others' . . . is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.<sup>63</sup>

Likewise, the power of the Church is based on this Christological principle, "[t]he church is the church only when it exists for others . . . it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word and emphasis and power."<sup>64</sup> "Being there for others" constitutes the social reality underlying power's meaning. Bonhoeffer's ethical notion of the transcendent replaces metaphysical notions here:

Our relation to God is not a 'religious' relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable--that is not authentic transcendence--but our relation to God is a new life in 'existence for others', through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation.<sup>65</sup>

And again, Bonhoeffer draws out some of the specific, concrete manifestations such power takes in the Church:

The church is the church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and

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<sup>63</sup> Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 381.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 382-83.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 381.

serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.<sup>66</sup>

Bonhoeffer articulated the concrete, ethical parameters by which God's freedom for others may be known in an increasingly autonomous world, and he cast its' ethical identity socially in terms of power. "Being there for others" captured in definitive form the concrete, christological expression of such power. And he suggested some radical ideas for how this social power might look in the world. Giving away property and suggesting unsalaried clergy positions suggest the seriousness with which Bonhoeffer took this vicarious principle of "existing for others."

## 2. New Expressions of "Middle" and "Boundary"

Bonhoeffer discussed the nature of God's power not only in social terms as "being there for others" but in terms of place. He was pressed throughout his life to understand the way God was and is present in the world. His lifelong query, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" aphoristically represented this concern, and for him, as for Luther, the mundane image of the cross depicted Christ's presence most clearly. And yet, this Incarnate presence is partially hidden and remains a mystery to human knowledge.<sup>67</sup> Given the incarnate, hidden presence of Christ in the world, Bonhoeffer made it clear in the letters from prison that God is in the center of life, not on its boundaries:

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 382, 383.

<sup>67</sup> cf. Bonhoeffer's Christmas letter of 1939 to the ordinands to see his Lutheran emphasis on the mystery of the incarnation. Bonhoeffer, True Patriotism, pp. 28-33.

It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously . . . to reserve some space for God; I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and goodness.<sup>68</sup>

And again, one month later in a letter from prison he said:

Here again, God is no stop-gap; he must be recognized at the centre of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the centre of life, and he certainly didn't 'come' to answer our unsolved problems. From the centre of life certain questions, and their answers, are seen to be wholly irrelevant . . .<sup>69</sup>

Whereas he spoke of God at the center spatially in Creation and Fall with the tree of life, he broadened his notion of the "middle" (die Mitte) as we saw in Ethics, where Christ is at the very heart of reality in an ontological sense--all of reality being held together in Him. Bonhoeffer became increasingly skeptical of describing God's place in the world in spatial terms.<sup>70</sup> An autonomous, responsible humanity had pushed the God

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<sup>68</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 282.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>70</sup> Note that Bonhoeffer spoke in terms of power and weakness in his description of God's place in the world: "Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail--in fact it is always the deus ex machina that they bring on the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure--always, that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries. Of necessity, that can go on only till people can by their own strength push these boundaries somewhat further out, so that God becomes superfluous as a deus ex machina. I've come to be doubtful of talking about any human boundaries (is even death, which people now hardly fear, and is sin, which they now hardly



concept to the limits or boundaries of human existence, taking up residence in the middle of life. Bonhoeffer expanded his middle-boundary thematic onto a more profoundly social plane with his elaboration of what responsible action looks like in a world come of age.

For Bonhoeffer, true identity as a person and as a Christian is gained as one embraces the mundane world and sees God's place in it:

By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God in the world--watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian.<sup>71</sup>

"Righteous" or "responsible" action in the world, half of the arcane discipline's dialectic, is determined by a radical acceptance of this world in all its goodness and chaos without offering any excuses. Christian actions, then, become congruent with the realities of this world. There is no attempt to reinterpret the world from a religious schema, nor is there an external distinction between Christian and secular action, per se, as much as we may look for it.

At this point one can see clearly how Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts is more of an

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understand, still a genuine boundary today?). It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously in this way to reserve some space for God; I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and goodness." Ibid., Letter of 30 April 1944, pp. 281-82 (Emphasis added).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., Letter of 21 July, 1944, p. 370.

ethical category than a hermeneutical one.<sup>72</sup> He described "righteous action" as a category that applies to Christian and non-Christian alike. In Ethics, responsibility as deputyship expressed the kind of action that an autonomous humanity is about, and in Letters and Papers from Prison he expressed the exact same idea in the christological terms he utilized throughout his theological corpus--the vicarious principle of "being there for others." In this way, he set out specific parameters which determine the identity of the modern person and the Christian simultaneously. But how does the arcane discipline, and specifically, "righteous action" guarantee the Christian's identity in the world?

### 3. "Sharing in God's Sufferings in the World"

Bonhoeffer discussed the parameters by which the Christian simultaneously identifies with a world come of age yet maintains some kind of distinction from it. He expressed this most eloquently in his poem "Christians and Pagans":

1

Men go to God when they are sore bestead,  
Pray to him for succor, for his peace, for bread,  
For mercy for them sick, sinning, or dead;  
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.

2

Men go to God when he is sore bestead,  
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,

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<sup>72</sup> Recall Bethge's clarification of the non-religious interpretation: "... non-religious interpretation is more an ethical than a hermeneutical category and also a direct call to penitence directed at the Church and its present form--for the sake of, if one likes, the kerygma, the language." Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 783.

Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;  
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.

3

God goes to every man when sore bestead,  
Feeds body and spirit with his bread;  
For Christians, pagans alike he hangs dead,  
And both alike forgiving.<sup>73</sup>

In his letter of 18 July 1944, Bonhoeffer elaborated on his poem and how Christians maintain their identity.<sup>74</sup> Christians must "really live in the godless world," accepting the "secular" way of life. They must not try to be religious, but to be the person "that Christ creates in us."<sup>75</sup> Then, he spells it out once again, what separates Christians from their non-Christian neighbors:

It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is metanoia: not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event, . . .<sup>76</sup>

Sharing in this suffering of God is the distinguishing factor. This is the kind of action which typifies the responsible action

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<sup>73</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 348-49.

<sup>74</sup> "The poem about Christians and pagans contains an idea that you [Bethge] will recognize: 'Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving'; that is what distinguishes Christians from pagans. Jesus asked in Gethsemane, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" That is a reversal of what the religious man expects from God. Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world." Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 361.

<sup>75</sup> Such a motif clearly echoes Bonhoeffer's theme of conformation in Ethics.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 361, 362.

of God's people in a way which definitively sets them apart.<sup>77</sup> It is the "righteous action" Bonhoeffer was after in the arcane discipline, an integral aspect of that which guarantees the Christian followers' identity in a mature world. But Bonhoeffer asked the specific question which must inevitably be addressed to such an ethically-oriented form of identification: "what does this life look like, this participation in the powerlessness of God in the world?"

We recall his thoughts about suffering from chapter one of this study, where he was hesitant to discuss such suffering openly for fear of it being glorified and overestimated as a general theme in the Christian life. However, he wrote freely, now, about another kind of suffering, another kind of action altogether--the sufferings of God in the world. Bonhoeffer pointed to a suffering which is freely chosen, yet is guided and defined by God. This is the specific action which guarantees the Christian identity in the world, the kind of action he envisions in the arcane discipline. This difference between Christian action and that of a non-believer has to do with whether the particular action is committed to God's guidance or not.

Eberhard Bethge, in a recent interview, however, pointed out that even when a person commits their actions to God's guidance and fully believes it to be in accord with God's will, an idolatry of the cross can still occur. In his discussion of the

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<sup>77</sup> Bonhoeffer's youngest sister, Susanne Dress, pointed out that it was this decision to stand by God in His hour of grieving that brought Dietrich himself to the gallows. Yet, he shunned dramatizing his own suffering in prison (as we have seen), measuring it against the suffering of Jesus Christ. It was "his willingness and ability to suffer which emerged from the very fullness of his life's opportunities, and which he enjoyed consciously and gratefully." Susanne Dress, "Remarks on the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," Union Seminary Quarterly Review, Vol. XXV, No. 2, (Winter, 1970), p. 148.

poem "Christians and Pagans," he emphasized the movement of the poem.<sup>78</sup> In the first stanza unbelievers ask God for mercy in the midst of need and suffering. This is what you would expect from the "religious" person as well as the Christian. But then there is a great reversal in the second stanza, and the religious person is surprised by the description of God and Christians found there. The terms are switched, and God is characterized as the weak One and Christians stand by God. But this is exactly where the misunderstanding can occur. The Christians might overestimate their suffering with God, misunderstanding the nature of His weakness and the nature of their power. Thus, an "idolatry of the cross" occurs.

Thus, we have the third stanza, and herein lay the secret of the power of God's weakness: the granting of forgiveness to Christian and sinner alike through his ultimate sacrifice for all persons. This "secret" was at the center of Bonhoeffer and his theology, particularly in his notion of the arcane discipline. In this way, one's identity and action is ultimately decided by God who alone confers forgiveness, and the one who shares in the "messianic" suffering recognizes God's hidden power at the root of any human action, no matter how noble or selfless. This recognition of God's hidden power in the world, in terms of justification, demonstrates most fully not only how Bonhoeffer surpassed Luther's understanding of God's hiddenness in the world in ethical terms of atonement, but the extent to which the theologia crucis informs the church's identity, as well as the nature of human autonomy in a world come of age. His theology

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<sup>78</sup> See Appendix I.

of the cross went far in determining a new ethical paradigm by which modernity might understand itself anew.

#### 4. Taking a Second Look at Who God is for Us Today

If we were to leave Bonhoeffer's description of the arcane discipline there, it would not do justice to the theological motivation underlying his new theological formulae. He laid out the terms of an increasingly autonomous human period in history for Christian and non-Christian alike, providing a framework by which an identity might be gained for both. He also articulated the specific nature of that which protects or guarantees the identity of the Christian in the world so that a complete identification would not be inferred or misunderstood from his theological formulae of a "non-religious age" or a "worldly interpretation."

He elaborated further on the nature of Christian action and its' autonomy in christological terms of being free for others. Bonhoeffer not only demonstrated the positive values underlying his anthropology, which included Christians and non-Christians alike, he did so specifically in terms of the theologia crucis. From this framework we understand most accurately how Bonhoeffer brought together his ideas on the autonomous nature of mature human action and God's hidden presence in the world. Whereas his statements about a world come of age tend to be viewed in light of the weak Christ who has been pushed out of the world, Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross went deeper, ultimately pointing to the hidden power of God in the world as the cornerstone upon which a strong humanity may rightly understand and judge its actions.



Once again, one must ask how it is that Bonhoeffer points to God's power at the heart of a world come of age in the Letters and Papers from Prison when so many statements explicitly point to the opposite--a suffering, powerless God, especially as we try to understand even more concretely the nature of Christian action in a secular world. Whereas we answered this in Chapter One, a more pronounced look at his theology of the cross is in order, for this is the heart of his understanding of the Church's proper identity and action in a modern world.

In Ethics he wrote:

The cross of the atonement is the setting free for life before God in the midst of the godless world; it is the setting free for life in genuine worldliness. The proclamation of the cross of the atonement is a setting free because it leaves behind it the vain attempts to deify the world and because it has overcome the disunions, tensions and conflicts between the 'Christian' element and the 'secular' element and calls for simple life and action in the belief that the reconciliation of the world with God has been accomplished. A life in genuine worldliness is possible only through the proclamation of Christ crucified.<sup>79</sup>

The cross is the reality in the midst of the world. It is the reconciliation of the world to God. Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the cross setting persons free in a godless world is important. This is so because it is not an understanding of human freedom as an abstract concept; it is a social understanding of freedom, one which sets free for others. The cross is not a spiritualized reality, but is, rather, the power of God in the midst of a godless world. In his statements on the significance of the

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<sup>79</sup> Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 297.

cross for the world, Bonhoeffer pointed out the ramifications of a world which does not understand itself in terms of the cross:

Without or against the proclamation of the cross of Christ there can be no recognition of the godlessness and godforsakenness of the world, but the worldly element will rather seek always to satisfy its insatiable longing for its own deification.<sup>80</sup>

While Bonhoeffer was happy to see the rejection of the "God of the gaps" concept, he enthusiastically hailed the fact that modernity had paved a way for the real living God of the Bible to gain expression. Rather than God's strength, Bonhoeffer pointed to God's "suffering"<sup>81</sup>, "weakness"<sup>82</sup> and "powerlessness"<sup>83</sup> in the world as the only way he is with us. He showed us what he meant in concrete terms by God's weakness and suffering. Such weakness is characterized by the passion event--the selfless, sacrificial taking on of others' guilt, offering gracious forgiveness to the point of death on the cross. This is the shape and form of the Son of God in the world, and His power is characterized in social terms of "being there for others." It was the ultimate sacrifice for humanity, yet it remains the ultimate power of God in the world,<sup>84</sup> partially hidden by its very social expression.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Letters of 18 July, 1944, and 28 July, 1944, pp. 361-62, 374-75.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Letter of 16 July, 1944, pp. 360-61.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> "The justification of the sinner--this is the self-proof of the sole authority of God." Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. III, p. 109.

Bonhoeffer said this God "wins power and space in the world by his weakness."<sup>85</sup> It is the same God whose omnipotence is grounded in his "being there for others." He was pointing to another kind of divine power altogether which lay at the heart of his notion of who God is in a modern world, and it gathered its meaning in ethical terms of atonement. In this way, like Luther before him, Bonhoeffer took the notion of God's omnipotence and did away with its metaphysically-oriented definition, joining in with a world come of age which had recognized the falsity involved in a deus ex machina.

In his theological letter of 16 July 1944, Bonhoeffer referred to Mark 15.34, which is Jesus' "cry of dereliction", "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" as Biblical evidence of the fact that the real God is one who forsakes, not one who rescues men and women in omnipotent splendor. In this way, Bonhoeffer forces the reader to come to grips with a harsh picture of who and where God is. God as invincible victor does not exist in the world--that is only a false wish. But God is present in the cross of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer forces a reconsideration of the terms of Christ's presence, terms which contradict traditional beliefs about God.

For the German pastor, God's presence in the world is expressed concretely in the two ways which were just discussed above: in terms of who God is--in socio-ethical terms as "the Man for others," and in terms of where God is--in hidden-yet-present terms of "center" and "boundary." The terms of God's presence go so sharply against any projected images of power and glory that a radical reconsideration of God is called for.

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<sup>85</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 361.

Although the world has certainly entered into a period of unprecedented autonomy and independence in comparison to past generations, many Christians still hold strongly to the notion of God as omnipotent in a way that takes God's costly action in behalf of others for granted. God ends up being a crutch on which to rely during the difficult times, during times when human knowledge reaches its limits. For these, Bonhoeffer's non-religious depiction of God as powerless and weak in the world is a herald which needs desperately to be heard. Not only is an outdated theological understanding at stake with such a prehension, but human definitions and practices of power based on such an understanding end up yielding asocial, dominating connotations.

At the same time, because God's presence is hidden in nature, to many, God is truly absent from the world. This is the danger facing an autonomous age that has done away with the deus ex machina, but that might now perceive a permanent divine absence. This is why it was so important for Bonhoeffer to outline the nature of God's presence in terms of weakness and to explain what that means in a world come of age. That he laid out the terms of God's presence according to the theologia crucis is fully evident in the way he discusses the hidden nature of God's true power in the world. In this way, Bonhoeffer forces a world come of age to come to terms with God's ultimate act of costly forgiveness on the cross in socio-ethical terms. Unless these terms are taken seriously, humanity risks the self-deification and deception which result from a skewed understanding of its own autonomy.

Not only is a socio-ethical understanding of God's power in the world dictated by the terms of the cross, in terms of his

"being there for others," a theological understanding of that same power is gained in the ultimate justification Jesus Christ affords persons through His selfless action. By pointing exclusively to weakness as the starting point for understanding God's hidden presence, old abstract definitions are buried, and new concrete ones are restored to vision, yielding God's true power in the world. This power is characterized by sociality, not domination and tyranny; it is defined explicitly as a "being there for others," not treating persons as unthinking, weak subjects; it is defined concretely in Christ's ethical action on the cross, not abstractly in anthropologically metaphysical definitions; it is gained in terms of justification: incurring the guilt of others,<sup>86</sup> bearing their sins and forgiving them, not in terms of getting one's way over others; it is hidden in weakness, according to the terms of the cross, not directly manifest to all in conventional or arbitrary terms.

This is Bonhoeffer's theologia crucis at its highest, for not only did he point to God's weakness in the world as the defining point for modern humanity, both Christian and non-Christian to understand itself aright; he suggested new terms for God's power, and thus, the Church's power in the world. But we miss this profound "movement" in his theology of the cross, seeing only the weakness of God in the world and not perceiving the profound nature of His power and how it informs Christian power, if we do not recognize how Bonhoeffer uses his new theological formulae.

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<sup>86</sup> Bethge brings this point home in his interview where he discusses Bonhoeffer's view on being responsible and incurring guilt in the plot against Hitler. See Appendix I, p. 318.

By using paradoxical language, the inevitable reordering of values is evident, specifically with reference to the concept of power. Bonhoeffer identified the human tendency of past generations to look for God's power in the world according to its sinful understanding of what should constitute such a reality. Although hailing the progress of human autonomy with the modern generation, he did not leave the world come of age exempt from its sinful tendency--to deify itself with the false belief that its' power is sufficient unto itself and that no place for God remains in such a world. Against both distorted notions of God's presence and absence, respectively, Bonhoeffer held up the cross as the sole locus for determining God's place and presence in the world. Both past generations and the present generation may not be able to accept such an understanding of God because of the terms in which God makes Himself known. Not only is it a hidden presence, it is best understood in social terms. We prefer definitions that offer direct access and divine tutelage for ourselves or absence and asocial autonomy from God. Instead, Bonhoeffer points only to the "Man for others."

If Bonhoeffer is offering up a new definition of God's power in socio-ethical terms and in theological terms which parallel one another, then how are we to understand Christian action in the world? What is its power? As Bonhoeffer continued his thoughts in the prison letters on an autonomous humanity and God's suffering in the world, and as he pointed to new theological formulae like the "arcane discipline," a "world come of age," and a "non-religious interpretation of theological concepts," he carried through with his ethically-grounded hermeneutic, offering up a new way God's presence might be understood aright in a world



that had grown tired of a childish god-concept, guaranteeing the Church of its identity in the same ethical terms.

Just as the terms of human responsibility in Ethics achieved their meaning from concepts like freedom, acceptance of guilt, and deputyship, so Bonhoeffer's christological principle of "being there for others," involving the same ideas, is at the heart of God's powerful presence in the world. In other words, human power, or autonomy, and divine power both gained expression in terms of the christological event of the atonement. But Bonhoeffer had a special word for the Church, for those who are "caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, . . . into the messianic suffering of God."<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer, following Luther, believed true theology speaks of the disciple's cross as much as it does Christ's. And he spoke of this discipleship in terms of God's ultimate word of grace and human penultimate action which prepares its way. We turn now to see how Bonhoeffer expressed in ethical terms the way God's grace may lead contemporary society toward its work of preparation.

#### IV. Preparing the Way for a New Model of Power

As Bonhoeffer struggled to articulate the contours of the Christian's participation in God's powerlessness in the world, he made a clear connection between Christ's cross and that of the Christian. First, about God and the nature of His power:

Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. Encounter with Jesus Christ. The experi-

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<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 361-62.

ence that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that 'Jesus is there only for others'. His 'being there for others' is the experience of transcendence. It is only this 'being there for others', maintained till death, that is the ground of [God's] omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence . . .

And then, about the Church and the nature of its power:

[t]he church is the church only when it exists for others . . . [i]t must not under-estimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important to Paul); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power.<sup>88</sup>

The similarity is vastly apparent. In opposition to any abstract concept having to do with God, the Church and the form of their presence in the world, Bonhoeffer offered a thoroughly socio-ethical and theological definition of both. "Being there for others," the christological principle which shaped his entire theology, turned out to be the partially hidden form of God's true power in the world. And the arcane discipline, with its ethical notion of prayer and righteous action, is the hidden form of the Church's presence and power in the world.<sup>89</sup> Therein lies the redefinition of divine and ecclesiological presence according to the cross in terms of hiddenness and power.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Outline for a Book," pp. 381-383.

<sup>89</sup> Recall that Bonhoeffer described the "arcane discipline" in terms of mystery, silence, and invisibility." Cf. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pp. 784-86.

<sup>90</sup> In pointing out the uncanny similarities between the theologies of Ronald Gregor Smith and Bonhoeffer, Clements highlights one very interesting similarity. He said, "Gregor Smith was still deeply under Kierkegaard's influence in these war years, and of course the theme of the suffering and humiliation of Christ was central to Kierkegaard, especially for example in his book Training in Christianity. But whereas Kierkegaard

With the concept of the arcane discipline, Bonhoeffer articulated in non-religious terms God's ethical transcendence in the world. As we remember, Bethge affirmed the non-religious interpretation as "more an ethical than a hermeneutical category and also a direct call to penitence directed at the Church and its present form--for the sake of . . . the kerygma, the language."<sup>91</sup> The arcane discipline is a prime example of this interpretation. And we hold that this is the way Bonhoeffer depicted God's transcendent presence in ethical terms, overcoming the weakness of Barth's unfinished religious critique. And the fact that he did so in dialectical terms of power and weakness, ultimately in conjunction with the terms of a theology of the cross, augurs well the paradigm which runs throughout his life and thought.

For Bonhoeffer, God's power was redefined in christological terms of "being there for others," taking on human sin and guilt, and offering forgiveness to sinner and Christian alike. Indeed, God's authority is self-evidenced in the justification of the sinner. This is the locus by which God's power in the world may be understood. His poem "Christians and Pagans" reflects this most fully. The church's power was redefined in the same way, as an "existing for others" which involves taking on the sin and

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stresses the offence of Jesus' suffering humanity, the absurd paradox of the crucified God-man, Gregor Smith simply points to the 'fact' of the humanity of Jesus as the sign and explanation of his divinity. Gregor Smith is not asking for acceptance of an absurdity, but for a reversal of the assumptions which make for absurdity--and by so doing was coming close to the very Lutheran christology which the imprisoned Bonhoeffer was shortly to re-emphasize . . . Clements, What Freedom?, p. 162. It is this "reversal of the assumptions which make for absurdity" that we are after in depicting the transformation of values and redefinitions which surface in Bonhoeffer's theology.

<sup>91</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 783.

guilt of others, standing in their place vicariously and performing sacrificial acts in their behalf. This is the more specific meaning assigned to the "Messianic sufferings of God in the world" which Christian followers join in. Thus, the ambiguity surrounding some of these "problematic" ideas<sup>92</sup> is clarified at a basic level, and they surface as more fully informed and instructive motifs than is often credited them.<sup>93</sup>

Bonhoeffer, then, was able to realize, at least partly, who Jesus Christ was for him, or more particularly, would be for the coming generation, with this new theological formulae of the arcane discipline. Prayer which leads Christians into the Messianic sufferings of God in the world is the concrete, ethical expression of God's ultimate grace leading followers into paths of righteousness for his sake. Beyond imitation, it is a "preparing of the way" which is created in us, in free obedience to the one who is the "Man for others," Jesus Christ. But this way is a hidden way, not one that all will discern or follow.

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<sup>92</sup> See Simon Fisher, Revelatory Positivism, p. 313.

<sup>93</sup> Humility is at the root of Bonhoeffer's vision for the way the Christian community may prepare the way for a new model of power. And it is a humility borne out of "selfless self-assertion" as Bonhoeffer described it, not an arrogant acting in one's own behalf or a concern primarily with self-preservation. As John Godsey pointed out, "Far too often in the history of the church Christians have acted as if they were better than others. They have forgotten that their call is not to privilege but to service. To the extent that they have elevated themselves over others they have lowered themselves in the eyes of God. Christian missionaries have lorded it over natives and have demeaned their culture. Christian armies have carried on crusades against the heathen . . . Where there is no humility, there is no understanding of Christian freedom or Christian love." John D. Godsey, "Toward A Theology of Maturity," Unpublished paper presented at the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference in New York City at Union Theological Seminary, August, 1992, pp. 8, 9. That humility is assigned to power is made all too clear by Bonhoeffer pointing out it in his "Outline for a Book" that Christ's selfless "being there for others" is the defining point of His power in the world.

It is a way marked by power, but a power characterized by selfless service for others incurring guilt and granting forgiveness to others. Moreover, the Church's power is protected from falling into self-idolatry because God's ultimate forgiveness for the Church of its sins leads it humbly toward the way that it is to prepare for others.

Bonhoeffer asked us to let those who suffer inform our actions in the world, a notion in full keeping with the theologia crucis' emphasis on the suffering humanity of Christ. Indeed, God's ultimate forgiveness leads us to desire nothing other than to serve. He said, "We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer."<sup>94</sup> Allowing those who suffer to inform our actions in terms of service reflects a large part of the essence of God's grace which transforms us and turns us away from our own self-interests. The arcane discipline holds within its structure the theological and socio-ethical understanding of God's powerful presence in the world, and how it leads the Church to paths of action which conform to His selfless action of "being there for others." And it is the hiddenness of the secret discipline which not only protects it from profanation, but which reveals the true nature of its power.

Because many persons perceive God's presence in terms of a Sovereign potentate who is in control of human affairs, and because many perceive God's permanent absence in the world as well, it becomes imperative to understand the nature of God's hiddenness, and Bonhoeffer does so in a way that brings comfort and hope. The hiddenness of God's presence in terms of weakness

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<sup>94</sup> Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 10.

is God's very strength. And this hiddenness is understood in more than one sense. Hidden behind our sinful understanding of what constitutes not only divine power, but human power as well, is the true power of the cross which reverses these distorted images. The person becomes not an object to be dominated or overcome, but a gift of God to be served. God's true power restores one's vision of the other as person, not object, and the nature of power as service, not domination. Only the cross with its "costly forgiveness" reverses these wrong definitions of God, wrong definitions of persons, wrong definitions of power. It is the hermeneutical guide toward such definitions which makes transformative definitions ethically possible in this-worldly living.

The hiddenness involved in Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ and the Christian's power resides in the hiddenness of the arcane discipline. Bonhoeffer's description of the Church's power as "existing for others," specifically through prayer and righteous action, presumes a transformation which occurs in the do-er of the action. Such grace-filled change as a result of God's gracious forgiveness manifests itself in persons' attitudes, lifestyles, relationships, and actions. The hidden change formed in the person becomes visible in specific, concrete ways, terms which Bonhoeffer began putting expression to with the notion of the arcane discipline. Such a model excludes patronizing action "for the other" because it fundamentally involves persons in relation with one another. Action for the other might be defined in terms of the do-er's new attitude toward personal money management, food consumption, worship, prayer, tithing, education, etc. Bonhoeffer articulated the beginning of his vision for the way the Church could exert its power "existing for



others" in terms of relinquishing property, bi-vocational clergy, unsalaried positions, etc. Thus, it is never blind, ill-informed action "for the other" but action in active, well-educated relationship "with and for the other."

### Conclusions

Bonhoeffer was beginning to articulate new parameters for the church, new parameters by which Christ's presence may be understood. He expressed this in the Ethics with the notions of the ultimate-penultimate, and conformation, and again in the Letters and Papers from Prison with the arcane discipline. This is but a part of the new language he struggled with to express what Christianity in a non-religious age would look like. Its hiddenness is partly understood in eschatological terms, terms which promise hope and new direction for the Church in a world come of age.<sup>95</sup> Bonhoeffer provides a model of power which gains its meaning in terms of his theologia crucis. With the arcane discipline he proposed a period of temporary silence in the Church so that its identity might be renewed and recast in connection with a world which had grown up and cast away old images and definitions. As a result of this investigation we see a new definition and model of God's power in the world has been borne from within the structures of Bonhoeffer's theology itself.

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<sup>95</sup> Such hope is seen no more clearly than in former Eastern European churches where Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts helped Christians living under the pressure of atheism break through communist and atheistic isolation and proclaim the gospel in non-religious terms for their own countries. See Jan Ligus, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Democracy," unpublished paper presented at the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Society Conference, Union Theological Seminary, August 1992, p. 2.

Indeed, the time for silence has passed, and the Church stands faced with positive new terms and practices assigned to power and how they are manifest in the world. It is a language of promise and hope bequeathed to the present generation, its very potency evidenced by its hiddenness.

The contemporary Western Church will demonstrate whether or not its action is turned in upon itself or is fundamentally turned outward toward the other.<sup>96</sup> It will demonstrate whether its identity and action is gained from conformation to God's gracious self-giving for others, or whether it evidences a corrupted practice of power, fixated on itself. A new ethical model of power, such as the arcane discipline, will only take hold in a world come of age by allowing Christ's hidden presence to take shape. Unless such conformation takes place within the Christian community, we will forever be in pursuit of images, symbols and metaphors, trying to gain for humanity what cannot be achieved by human effort, no matter how noble or clear-sighted. Bonhoeffer's model of power for the Church--prayer and 'righteous' action in the world--brings a fresh understanding of what constitutes true power and what does not. Such a language assigns authority to service, sociality to power, grace to limits, and a hiddenness to reality. The question is, are the Church and the world ready to hear this new word?

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<sup>96</sup> In his recent book What Freedom? Keith Clements helpfully points to the notion of the Church as "deputy", drawing from Bonhoeffer's Ethics (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1990, pp. 97, 98). With such a notion, a dominion of the church over society and the world is rejected and "being there for others", the christological principle of vicarious action is authoritative instead. Further, we would point out our earlier point--that God's dominion or rule in the world manifests itself in terms of deputyship. This is the nature of divine rule and the church's power in the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

Bonhoeffer's perennial query is well known--Who is Jesus Christ? And who is he for us today? Our research yielded an interesting partial answer to the German pastor's relentless question. By taking a long hard look at the way God is concretely present in the modern world, we came to discover a new paradigm in Bonhoeffer's theology. We saw a new language therein, providing critical content to the concepts of human and divine power in terms of the cross. We turn now to take stock of Bonhoeffer's paradigm of power and to clarify whether it does provide a coherent and promising path for theology today. We begin by summarizing the individual findings of the four chapters, concluding with final comments on the study as a whole.

In chapter one we saw how Bonhoeffer came to describe God increasingly in terms of weakness and less in terms of power. In so doing, a paradigm surfaced, one out of which he articulated his understanding of God. We demonstrated this by going through his theological corpus, showing a steady progression of such terminology from his early work until his last theological letters in prison. This progression revealed how God came to be described more explicitly and thoroughly in terms of powerlessness. Hence, Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross, which we identified clearly in The Cost of Discipleship and fully in Letters and Papers from Prison, demonstrates that his understanding of God as hidden was expressed consistently and specifically in terms of God's weakness hiding God's power. Rather than permanently eschewing the notion of God as powerful and advocating one in diametrically opposite terms--a weak God--Bonhoeffer held up God's weakness on the cross, in the world, as the way to

understand God's real power. The cross provided that critical content.

We came away from our examination of the progression with a definition of sorts, involving a two-part "movement" in Bonhoeffer's understanding of God. It could be stated in the following way: first, there is a reversal of terms. Bonhoeffer discussed God less and less explicitly in terms of power, relinquishing any lingering titanic images and incorporating the "weak" God more and more. Although he eventually came to say that God is not as we imagine,<sup>1</sup> he did not leave traditional notions of God in critique. He offered a constructive proposal, a redefinition of terms.

The redefinition constituted the second part of the two part "movement" in Bonhoeffer's definition of power. By this we mean that the meaning attached to the "weak God" was increasingly gathered in terms of the theologia crucis. Thus, Bonhoeffer not only pointed to a theological method (a reversal of terms), but a theological content (a redefinition based on a re-evaluation of values) which is fully in line with that of Luther's theology of the cross. Method and content reflect and inform one another. The re-evaluation of values that occurs as a result, specifically, is that God's power is his self-giving of himself on the cross.

At the heart of the redefinition is Bonhoeffer's notion of "the power of weakness," one of the most profound theological concepts he was to hold to throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> The passion

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of 21 August, 1944, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 391.

<sup>2</sup> According to Bethge in his biography, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 374.

event is the authoritative demonstration of divine power in the world, and Bonhoeffer describes it in thoroughly social terms, emphasizing the ethical nature of God's atonement in the process. Such power remains hidden to the world, however, because of misdirected preconceptions of what God's power in the world looks like.

Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross has been underestimated in the past for two reasons: first, because of a lack of identification and recognition of the dialectical terms, the language--weakness and power--in which it came to expression; secondly and, simultaneously, the way in which these terms increasingly took on their meaning, dialectically, according to Luther's theologia crucis throughout his theology. Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross is typically assigned to The Cost of Discipleship and Letters and Papers from Prison and left there. Although certain themes of his theologia crucis have been identified in Bonhoeffer's early work among scholars, the failure to identify this dialectical motif has contributed toward this unintentional underestimation.

In chapter one we saw how Bonhoeffer provides us with a new definition, a new language by which God may be understood in terms of power. In chapter two, we moved on to see what such a definition meant for human power as against conventional understandings by looking particularly to his Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison. In this chapter we saw the reversal of terms and redefinition of power in explicit detail, along with the "re-evaluation of values" that occurs with a theology of the cross. Looking at the way Bonhoeffer discussed divine weakness in relation to human strength provided the sharpened focus.

Bonhoeffer rejected the twin notions of persons exercising power over God as well as the idea that God lords power over human beings. With Barth, Bonhoeffer did away with the 'religious' idea of God.<sup>3</sup> With Bultmann, he assigned anthropological "weakness" a credible status in the theological enterprise, particularly by rejecting the notion of a deus ex machina. However, Bonhoeffer departed from the status Bultmann assigned to weakness as the paradigmatic anthropological category. We showed how Bonhoeffer rejected any kind of "tyranny of weakness,"<sup>4</sup> yet how he reinstated another kind of weakness altogether which yielded power's true definition.

We then saw how Bonhoeffer, with Nietzsche and Feuerbach, rejected the notion of a powerful God who preys on weak human beings. Supplanting the strong God/weak humanity paradigm, their source of disagreement centered on their constructive proposals and how to deal with the death of this God concept. While the atheist philosophers replaced the God concept with a strong humanity, (i.e., becoming the superman (Über-mensch), Bonhoeffer agreed with the death of the God concept, replacing it with the living God of the Bible. In this way, Bonhoeffer pushes human reason to its limits, affirming full autonomy and health to

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<sup>3</sup> As Paul Lehmann said so well, "Barth and Bonhoeffer are being asked by the oncoming theologians of our time to make sense of Jesus Christ in the midst of the culture and experience of a "world come of age"; whereas Barth and Bonhoeffer, in their turn, are asking the oncoming theologians in our time to make sense of the culture and experience of a "world come of age" with due regard to the concrete presence and pressure of Jesus Christ in our midst . . . Paul Lehmann, "The Concreteness of Theology: Reflections on the Conversation Between Barth and Bonhoeffer," from Martin Rumscheidt, ed., Footnotes to a Theology: The Karl Barth Colloquium of 1972, (n.p.: The Corp. for the Publication of Academic Studies in Religion in Canada, n.d.), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> As Roger Johnson referred to it in his essay, "Religious Mythology and a Secular Faith: The Weakness of Man and the Weakness of God."



anthropology, while coming to terms (literally) with a very different God--a weak God whose power is manifest in a specific way in relationship with a strong, autonomous humanity.

Research has confirmed in the past the theology of the cross as the foundation of Bonhoeffer's "non-religious interpretation," but not in such a way as to see the profound extent to which it informs Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical idea. For example, Bonhoeffer proves that he is not vulnerable to the traditional charge against Luther, that his theology harbors a basic irrationalism. Joining in the philosophical challenge, Bonhoeffer pushed theology to make a more radical claim while affirming a healthy concept of humanity at the same time. His dialectical understanding of power reveals this healthy tension.

A second ramification of the connection between his theologia crucis and the non-religious interpretation has to do with his strong concept of humanity with the world-come-of-age. The question inevitably arises, if the two-part methodological movement of Bonhoeffer's notion of human power follows the same pattern as his notion of divine power, does the concept of an autonomous humanity hide within it a kind of weakness that is not self-evident and has not been named yet? If God's power is hidden in terms of weakness in the cross, does human power need to come to terms with its own weakness to be honest with itself? Bonhoeffer's understanding of the hidden nature of reality, along with his contextual remarks about the dangers inherent within modern society would suggest that such an investigation is warranted.

Eberhard Bethge said Bonhoeffer's new non-religious interpretation was to be understood as an ethical category moreso than a linguistic one. Chapters three and four focused on the

ethical terms bound up in Bonhoeffer's theological understanding of divine and human power. In chapter three we delved into one of his works, Creation and Fall, to examine his ethical treatment of sin in terms of power. While Luther did have a systematized, triadic understanding of sin (root--unfaith; fruit--ontic egocentricity; event--ingratitude), Bonhoeffer did not articulate his understanding in the same way. Certainly, he was limited by circumstance, as well as the fact that this was not an intentional part of his theological agenda in the same way as it was with Luther. However, he did have a very specific understanding of sin's event or concrete expression, and it came in terms of power.

While for Luther, the event of sin issues forth as ingratitude (Undankbarkeit), for Bonhoeffer it was understood as the human abuse or misuse of power. In his exegesis of Genesis 1-3, Bonhoeffer depicted sin as Adam's domination of Eve, treating her as an obstacle to be pushed aside. The other person became something to be overpowered. Sin took expression, then, in terms of a material objectification of the other, thus, a full sociality underlying his ethical depiction of sin's event.

It was interesting to see how Bonhoeffer described the relationship between Adam and Eve as it would be when restored by grace. The other (Eve) is seen by Adam as a person to be served and given thanks for. The relationship between the two is marked by selfless serving; understanding the other person as a gift by God. Sin wrenching this intimacy apart, creates a wedge between Adam and Eve so that domination of the other and self-centered thinking mark one's actions and attitudes.

It was also interesting to see how he described power from two different perspectives. He discussed it either as the power

of the other<sup>5</sup> in graceful, "outward-looking" terms as selfless, gracious service to and with another; or, power turned in on itself, in sinful, self-centered terms as objectifying domination of the other. In one case, he described human power socially, in terms of a person to be served thankfully; in the other case, the "other" person was described as an object to be pushed aside. Bonhoeffer's lectures on the Biblical creation account represent his most concrete expression of power where he characterized sin in terms of material objectification and domination of the other.

Such a paradigm for understanding sin's ethical, concrete event raises important issues and questions. First, we articulated the belief that a materialistic objectification of power is a very common one in contemporary Western society. Power as an object to be seized or possessed--such a notion indicates a negative understanding at its base. It remains something to be grabbed from the hands of others, something to be renounced, or, in its most positive light, a thing to be shared equitably among persons. Bonhoeffer showed us that he speaks of power in terms of sociality, not objectivization. Further, it is not only a social concept, it gains its meaning from Christ's selfless giving of himself for others as the authoritative demonstration of divine power.

Two questions arise as a result of Bonhoeffer's social understanding of sin in terms of power. First, he described the "other" in terms of a "limit" in his lectures on creation and sin. The notion of persons described as "limits" or "boundaries" extended across Bonhoeffer's theology. He made reference to it here, but whether or not it is a concept that fits into his

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<sup>5</sup> Or "strength" (Kraft) of the other as it occurs in the English translation of Creation and Fall.

overall social paradigm is worth being questioned. Adam's domination of Eve was regarded as a fundamental trespassing of the other, for she was his "limit." In this way, the notion of limit is consistent with Bonhoeffer's understanding of sin as an objectification of the other. But how do you emphasize the other as "limit" in power's graceful interpretation? How does one serve a limit? Articulating sin in social terms, as Bonhoeffer does, the use of this concept seems to indicate an inconsistency in his use of concepts, if not a limit to his overall depiction of sin's sociality.

A second question which must be raised has to do with Bonhoeffer's understanding of sin as domination of the other person. Agreeing with Luther, that the root of all sin is pride (superbia), he went on to define sin's ethical event issuing forth in terms of domination, objectification and aggression. But such terms do not accurately describe sin's event for many. Self-abnegation describes the ethical expression of sin for many, and Bonhoeffer's paradigm does not address this opposite expression of sin's event. This is a limit of Bonhoeffer's theology in that his normative depiction of sin as a material objectification of the other presumes pride at its base and domination as its expression. Hence, it would be wrong to assign Bonhoeffer's conception of sin universal status.

As a result of our investigation into chapters one, two and three, we came away with a definition of divine and human power in Bonhoeffer's theology as the selfless giving of oneself in relation with and for another. Christ's passion at the cross dictates this meaning, providing a critical measure against which conventional definitions may be measured. However, the notion of power defined in terms of service might not find acceptance

as a definition easily because of negative connotations easily associated with concepts like "selflessness" and "sacrifice." Is Bonhoeffer suggesting a "worm mentality"--suggesting we think of ourselves in reduced terms? Everything we have seen about his understanding of power does not suggest this in the least. In chapter two, his redefinition of humility clearly supplanted any quandry in this direction, not to mention his agreement with Nietzsche and Feuerbach's philosophical critique against a weak anthropology. It is a different kind of selfless service Bonhoeffer points us toward, and it was to this that we looked in chapter four.

Having identified the two-part movement of Bonhoeffer's definition of human and divine power in the previous chapters, in chapter four we sought to determine the full meaning of Bonhoeffer's dialectical concept of power and weakness. We did this by looking to his notion of the arcane discipline as a viable model for power. By looking at the political implications of prayer, the boldness involved in acting vicariously in behalf of others and the dialectic that exists between the two, we were able to show how the same "movement" occurred in his model of power as was true for his definition based on the event of the cross.

We saw how Bonhoeffer ingeniously linked eschatology with ethics--both in his notion of the arcane discipline and with his concept of conformation to Christ--and how such a linkage yields a new paradigm for understanding and exercising human power. We come away from his provocative thoughts, seeing "service" as a concept connoting a humble authority, rather than a cowering servitude. In this final chapter we saw most clearly how Bonhoeffer redefined power in terms of service, providing content

to both in dialectical fashion according to the hidden power of the crucified and risen Lord.

As a result of this study, we have seen the perennial question, "Who is Jesus Christ? Who is He for us today?" partially answered by Bonhoeffer in terms of a hidden presence: the weak, crucified Christ whose power is hidden in the the cross. That is where the meaning is determined. Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer was constantly striving to determine that concrete revelation of Christ's presence in the world. In every chapter we saw the ethical expression of this in terms of power.

By offering us this new understanding of who Jesus Christ is in terms of power, we understand the new language in terms of a christological ethic. The soteriological-ethical content of the act of Christ's atonement is the foundation for the new language. In this way, we see, finally, that Bonhoeffer did not make fragmentary and ambiguous stabs at a non-religious language. He gave a solid start and consistent expression to a new language from within his work as a whole. In this way, he went beyond Barth's critique of religion, offering concrete ethical expression to a new ethical language for the coming generation. With his dialectical concept of power he showed how power can be released from a meaning characterized by a materialistic objectivization to become a social, relational concept at its base. He demonstrates how power gains its fundamental meaning from the cross in terms of service, as opposed to conventional notions of power which commonly connote zero sum thinking.

With this new language and the specific meaning attached to it, we see Bonhoeffer reinstating "service" as well as "power" as theological concepts. He points to a new authority in service, just as he points to a new selflessness in power--all



as a social category, informed by Christ's act of atonement on the cross. "Power" is no longer bound by negative connotations and practices that presume domination, aggression, exploitation and reification of others, just as "service" is no longer bound by negative connotations and practices that presume subordination and self-abnegating behavior.

Finally, as a result of our investigation into Bonhoeffer's dialectical understanding of power, we see the legitimacy and need for power analysis in theology today. With him, we have a paradigm that holds within its contours critique and promise, a sure diacritical point by which theological definitions and assumptions can be weighed as well as new paths which will lead to fresh understandings and practices.

## APPENDIX I

Summary of  
Interview of Eberhard Bethge  
by Leslie Alford

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(On 20 November 1993, the author met with Eberhard Bethge in Wachtberg, Germany to discuss the ways in which the motifs of power and weakness manifest themselves in Bonhoeffer's life and theology. The following discussion is a summary of our interview, condensed for the sake of clarity and coherency.)

Alford: Toward the end of Creation and Fall Bonhoeffer described the Fall in terms of overpowering the other person and transgressing the limit of the other. God's grace after the Fall is discussed as restoring the human relationship, in terms of relating to the other as "gift", someone to be served. It seems that Bonhoeffer is speaking in those terms, with sin as an overpowering or a dominating of the other person, whereas with God's grace the person informs your very action. What is your understanding?

Bethge: The whole notion of Macht and ohne Macht which is in your thesis, is in fact an experience in the overriding theme of the human being as a related entity. Power is one way of relating to others. But you will be disappointed if

you use it, because it just destroys the relatedness. On the other hand, you cannot put it away, because it's always a play going on from one to another or from the other back. This was so with Bonhoeffer.

For example, Dietrich taught Sunday School in Berlin in Grunewald. There he experienced his own power in how the children wanted to be his friend and that made him nervous. He experienced his own power in how he attracted all kinds of children. This experience was with him so much so that one day he wrote a letter, which unfortunately is lost, to an older student in Tübingen, telling him about this experience in Sunday School, and how it could be dangerous. That letter unfortunately is lost but I think it is very characteristic.

Then there was the later period when he was a teacher of his students at Finkenwalde. He again experienced this power he had over others. In theology, in games, in all kinds of activities as the director there, he experienced this power.

You probably have heard that Bonhoeffer tried to revive oral confession at Finkenwalde. One day I was chosen by Bonhoeffer to listen to his confession. I was totally inexperienced in this. Bonhoeffer said he had days of deep depression sometimes, and that began when he was so successful. When he observed that people made themselves absolutely dependent on him to come to their own conclusions, then he started to lose all meaning of faith, because of this experience of success.

Again, that was his life experience, that he always controlled--physically, mentally, theologically--in every

matter. At the same time, he had the feeling that one could misuse that great power all the time. With that experience he came to points of deep depression.

A: I remember you've mentioned that in your biography at different points, that he would enter these depressions.

B: Which again makes clear that power is a means, and the priority is relatedness, positively and negatively.

A: I am reminded of the Ethics because there he brings up the theme of success. Exactly what you just said, in the context of Ethics, has to do with what Bonhoeffer said about deception when people assign so much authority, so much power, to a very charismatic figure. My understanding is that he is referring to Hitler at that time, and people's tendency at the time to buy into slogans and catchphrases, not thinking for themselves, and assigning their authority totally over to someone else. He begins to speak of that as deception, and how the terms of success are confused at that point.

One thing I am curious about, and particularly as I have seen the Life in Pictures--it seems that Bonhoeffer is a very "romantic" figure in the sense that it is very easy put him on a pedestal and not think of him as a person. That happens quite often in America, I think. But when I read what he was like, I would imagine that had I met him I would have been intimidated. You can sometimes get the impression that Bonhoeffer loved everyone, but he was demanding.

B: He was demanding. But of course he had a sense of humor and liked to tease. He didn't like to lose in games, he wanted to win, and was able to win.

A: I remember your recounting his days as a school child when he stood up and said "I will be a theologian!" Not many children that age would take things so seriously, and the experience says a lot about him, it seems to me.

B: Yes. I think that his whole life was a struggle to come to terms with his own power over others. And in the end he accepted it as a gift. As soon as you use your own power for others, then the tristitia or the accedia stopped. In a way, his returning from America in 1939 solved, or was a great contribution to solving, that problem. In America he would have continued and continued his own power. He would have become a great theological teacher, a great friend of all of them there. But it would have been a continuation of his own growing power. So, his whole biography is from promising, highest claims and highest possibilities. He wrote his dissertation earlier than anyone else, he was always open to becoming a professor, full professor in Berlin--the main place of theology in Germany in those days. Everything was open to him. Then his biography is one of reducing and reducing, going back, into nothing. He became nothing, not a bishop, not a professor. He became nothing, nothing.

He would have become a professor, of course, as soon as possible, in 1939 in America if he would have stayed. But that would have aggravated his problem of power. So he

came back. He decided to go back into that place where there was no prospect of a great career. But he gave his power in the service of others. In the form of his contribution to becoming a member of the conspiracy. Something which was, from his earlier point of view, absolutely impossible. The pacifist became a putschist.

That is the background out of which he could say after coming back here, in a letter he wrote to me, "No repetitions of tristitia." From that point on, not only in his theology, but in his life, he had made a step of no return in the service of others, with others.

A: In your biography you referred to his movement from talking about the weak Christian community as the locus where God's freedom limits itself in Act and Being, to The Cost of Discipleship, where he talked more about the weak Word that is despised and rejected and the weak Christ. You said one of the most profound aspects of Bonhoeffer is to be found in this "power of weakness." I wonder if you could say a little more about this "power of weakness" in a theological sense.

B: Well, look at the poem "Pagans and Believers."<sup>1</sup> That's

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<sup>1</sup> [For an aid to the reader, "Christians and Pagans" is reprinted:

1. Men go to God when they are sore bestead,  
Pray to him for sucour, for his peace, for bread,  
For mercy for them sick, sinning, or dead;  
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.
2. Men go to God when he is sore bestead,  
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,  
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;  
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.



very much in the center of him and of his theology. We have the pagans--they ask God for mercy. Then there is that complete opposite change in verse two. But that total change in verse two could itself become again something of the wrong power. Therefore, there is the third verse, in which Dietrich did not let that second verse become an ideal.

In his Christology he always looked under this kind of experience or dynamic: that step from the first verse to the second verse or from the second to the third. He knows exactly what religion is in verse one. That's very human, very understandable. Then he discovers that secret--even the cross can become idolatry, therefore, verse three.

A: When you say the word "idolatry" I think of the connections being made between Bonhoeffer and liberation theology, i.e., the emphasis on the theme of suffering. I found very helpful the element in Bonhoeffer that prevents an idolatry of suffering, and in that sense, an idolatry of the cross. But the deputizing element, as you pointed out in your biography, is what prevents it from slipping into an exaltation of mysticism or a self-pity of the suffering.

I don't know of another theologian who could speak so concretely about suffering in terms of responsibility. That is, being in such close relation with others, one's

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3. God goes to every man when sore bestead,  
Feeds body and spirit with his bread;  
For Christians, pagans alike he hangs dead,  
And both alike forgiving.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Christians and Pagans," Letters and Papers from Prison, (New York: Collier Books, 1972) p. 348.]

actions may involve suffering or sacrifice, but one is not thinking in terms of one's own suffering. That is what was so impressive about Bonhoeffer in the Letters where he said, "I don't consider what I'm doing suffering."

B: No, and not a martyr. The very early Christians--they understood apparently when they set the terms for what makes a martyr a martyr. Excluding that self-offering as a martyr which destroys martyrdom. First of all, martyrdom is to be acknowledged by the churches connected with the apostles, prophets, and the martyrs. Martyrs must do their acts out of free choice. But secondly, it must never be self-offering, because then you would exclude yourself totally off the list of being counted as a martyr.

Dietrich understood that. That's one of the secrets that in the Bonhoeffer family, in the most difficult years, you had to enjoy music and plays and such.

You know, we had our fiftieth wedding anniversary recently, Renate and me. On the 5th of April in 1943, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned. In the middle of May was our wedding and for that we had a great celebration in the family. If you look at these letters written by Dietrich, in those days he said, "You must enjoy your wedding. Don't cut it short and don't think that I suffer because I am not with you because I am in prison. You must enjoy it." So there never was self-pity, or an element of self-pity in him and in his suffering. That makes these letters and papers from prison so influential. That there is something of a freeing element in it. Even when there is death next to you, you enjoy life.

During the conspiracy, sometimes, some of the conspirators came together in that house, in that private house in Berlin. But first we played a concerto. Ernst von Harnack played the first flute, I played the second flute, Emmi Bonhoeffer and Renate's father played the violin, and Klaus Bonhoeffer played the cello. We did that with Dietrich. And when Dietrich was in prison, we continued to do that. That's such an important element of using your powers or gifts, the musical gift can be a power too.

I think in a way that that was a result of Dietrich's whole theology and life. That he understood, too, then how to deal with his power. His power over other people. His great gifts with which he was, and became, so influential, and even with his intellect. But at the end, difficult theological problems do not remain; but the most simple thing in life is at the same time the most difficult. So I've started now with your theme from another view. Power or non-power, weakness--that is all describing actually relatedness, positively and negatively. Dietrich looks at Christ and at the Church, what they are in that scheme.

A: I've wondered what you think of Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross. Much has been written on his notion of "joining in the messianic sufferings."

B: But the secret of Christ's sufferings is that in its uniqueness there is nothing unique. Exactly why it was the most human is what makes it so unique.

A: I wonder about a certain characteristic of God's hiddenness: how easily one can miss the nature of God's being in terms of atonement, and as a Bonhoeffer spoke of it, in selfless giving to others. Bonhoeffer's life not only reflects this but also certain concepts like "being there for others" and "deputyship." It seems to me that these concepts are examples of the theology of the cross in Bonhoeffer.

B: He always says two things. He says, one thing is at the same time another. It's always a dialectic.

A: How would you say a theology of the cross is present in his theology?

B: It takes on new dimensions of experiences that have to do with his own criticism to the cost of deception. That he suddenly realized, I am at the same direction of trying to find out how to realize or even to formulate it. But I have something monopolized or something that has come now on the point to become an ideologue. The theology of the cross as well as The Cost of Discipleship risked degenerating into an ideology.

A: Another question has to do with The Cost of Discipleship, the christology therein, and the way his theology of the cross was developing explicitly at that time.

B: We should look to the Barmen Declaration, the solus. It was an absolutely clear indication--Hitler is not God--but

Christ is the God. This involves one in a polemic situation. When I hear pastors preach, they have no idea that the book of Psalms and the Biblical language are so polemical most of the time. When you say, I pray to God, that means I pray to this God of the Bible and not the other gods.

This dynamic was of course very much alive in Hitler's time. When you pray a psalm to God it is always a fight against other gods. I think Dietrich was very much aware of that too--that Christ never could mean anything beside or in addition to the first commandment.

A: In this way, I can see how Bonhoeffer was able to speak simultaneously about the "weak Word" and the commanding Christ without contradiction in The Cost of Discipleship.

B: Yes. Of course, you cannot think of Dietrich by talking about the weakness, weakness of the Word, weakness of Christ. Weakness is never letting everything go. Weakness is never weakness understood in the sense of giving in. It is the highest form of fighting, which makes aggressive persons over against me helpless in a way. Therefore, each prayer is an aggressive Kampfanzug. I'm not submitting to you, or if I submit to you, it's not at all submission. I submit to you and with that I have the stronger weapon in my hands.

Therefore, you have the rediscovery of the Psalms, for instance, because the Psalms are also fighting language. Every prayer means an Absage to other gods. Every prayer

to Yahweh means a "no" to pagan gods, the stronger gods, the gods with whole armies on their side.

A: That's why I'm convinced too that one has to be very careful about suggesting what Bonhoeffer means by weakness because he constantly revolted against weakness, particularly in the Letters and Papers. I remember he considered it a greater sin than folly. That is why I think he is reinterpreting what power and weakness mean.

B: Yes, the Barmen Declaration always gives first a biblical sentence. Then comes a positive statement. And then always comes the negative, "we reject." And so, every positive prayer to God the Almighty is claiming that we know where "almightiness" is and we know where wrong "almightiness" is. With all their weapons they can make bloodshed. But they are powerless. It is this kind of triumphal prayer and knowing weakness that is the most powerful at work. Of course, that is not covering up your responsibility for Auschwitz.

A: What do you mean by that?

B: Auschwitz means putting aside the perpetrators, they have to be hindered, they have to be . . . even killed. That is different from making war. Or making war has very different motives or objectives.

Have you ever read Dietrich's decision to come back from the United States? It started during the nights of November 1938 when the synagogues were burned during



Kristalnacht. Dietrich was reading Psalm 74, "they are burning all the houses of God" and where "we have no prophets anymore." He made up his mind in those weeks. He started to think now, is confessing the Barmen Declaration enough? You have to stop that man. You have to take over the guilt by actions which are sinful in a normal time.

Then, one evening in 1940 or 1941 we sat together in the house of the Dohnanyi's and Hans Dohnanyi asked Dietrich, "Now there is that saying in the New Testament, 'he who takes the sword, shall be killed by the sword.' What about this? What about us?" Dietrich said, "Yes, that is true, and we'll be guilty. But these very people who are accepting that, they are now needed." This is the history behind it, which shows he doesn't say "No, you are justified by not taking any kind of weapon against these men." That is the progression to the Cost of Discipleship. He thinks about what the responsible action is and accepting the fact that there are several levels of guilt.

In America, once we were asked at Smith College "How could that theologian take action with the goal to kill Hitler?" Renate answered, "He does not have to justify that. The others who did not take action to kill Hitler, they have to be asked, 'How could they.'" You are not to ask, "How could he act that way." You have to ask, "How could he not act that way."

A: I have another question having to do with Nietzsche and Feuerbach, the influence they had on Bonhoeffer. My understanding is that he read Nietzsche early on.

B: Yes, he did.

A: And I think that Bonhoeffer scholarship has shown quite clearly that in these healthy, strong, vigorous images of humanity Bonhoeffer agrees with Nietzsche and Feuerbach that it's not right to have these weak images of humanity. Bonhoeffer scholars have pointed to the theology of the cross underlying that and as the impulse behind this very positive notion of contemporary Western men and women. I think people who want to argue for the philosophical influences in Bonhoeffer give too much credit, even though credit is due to them.

B: Too much, to Nietzsche and Feuerbach?

A: Yes, for these positive statements that he makes about humanity particularly in the late theology.

B: Now there is the Hegel Seminar of 1933. That will answer your question. But there was another reason why he liked to read Nietzsche here and there because of his fight with Wagner. We always wanted to come to terms with Wagner music. And we turned more and more to hate Wagner and not to love him. Now just these great messages about why Nietzsche became an enemy of Wagner. And how he formulates that and at the end Nietzsche says, "Wagner makes people believe that he's very great." But that's a side element.

Of course this has to do with Dietrich's attempt of being put away from the center of life. The emphasis in Nietzsche for life, of course, excited him very much

because that he wanted to discover this. And just through the theology of the cross. We have never mentioned now, Luther.

A: In fact, that's in a very basic way I'm wanting to argue for the "Lutheran-ness" of Bonhoeffer to be taking a little more seriously.

B: His criticism for Karl Holl, his teacher in Berlin, that's important there.

A: Perhaps it's nothing more than giving the credit where the credit is due and then not trying to overextend the point of where those influences are. I think those are the last questions, actually I'm sure I have a hundred more, but those were the main ones I have to ask.

## Appendix II

### Clifford Green's Sequence for Bonhoeffer's Ethics Presented at Fifth International Bonhoeffer Conference<sup>1</sup>

First Work Period: 18 March-13 November 1940

- "Christus, die Wirklichkeit und das Gute," August 1940?  
(Christ, Reality and Good)  
E 200-17, 225-26
- "Ethik als Gestaltung" (1) Sept. 1940  
(Ethics as Formation)  
E 68-77  
First organization phase:  
Zettel 1, 38, et al.
- "Ethik als Gestaltung" (2)  
(Ethics as Formation)  
E 77-94
- "Erbe und Verfall" (1) 9 Oct. 1940  
(Inheritance and Decay)  
E 94-113  
Organization phase:  
Zettel 16, 61, 50, 62, 82, 63-69  
on "Das Gute" (Good) for an unwritten chapter
- "Erbe und Verfall" (2)  
(Inheritance and Decay)  
E 113-16
- "Schuld, Rechtfertigung, Erneuerung"  
(Guilt, Justification and Renewal)  
E 117-27
- Insert for "Christus, die Wirklichkeit Oct.-Nov. 1940  
und das Gute"  
(Christ, Reality, and Good)

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Green, "Textual Research for the New Edition of Bonhoeffer's Ethics" Panel Discussion, in Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers, Guy Carter, René van Eyden, Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten, Jurjen Wiersma, eds. (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991).

Second Work Period: 17 November 1940-22 February 1941

"Die Letzen und die Vorletzten Dinge" up to 10 Dec. 1940  
 (The Last Things and The Things Before the Last)  
 E 128-52

"Das natürliche Leben" up to 22 Feb. 1940  
 (Natural Life)  
 E 152-198

Third Work Period: 25 March-25 October 1941

"Die Geschichte und das Gute" (1. Fassung)  
 (History and Good)  
 GS III, 455-77

"Die Geschichte und das Gute" (2. Fassung) 1941  
 (History and Good)  
 E 227-78

Fourth Work Period: End of 1941-Autumn 1942

["\`Personal'--und `Sach'--Ethos"]  
 ("Personal" and "Real" Ethos)  
 E 341-52

"Die Liebe Gottes und der Zerfall der Welt"  
 (The Love of God and the Decay of the World)  
 E 19-58

"Kirche und Welt I" 1942  
 (The Church and the World)  
 E 59-67

"Über die Möglichkeit des Wortes der Kirche an die Welt"  
 (On the Possibility of the Word of the Church to the World)  
 E 376-84

["Die Lehre vom primus usus legis nach den lutherischen  
 Bekenntnisschriften und ihre Kritik"]  
 (The Doctrine of the Primus Usus Legis According to  
 the Lutheran Symbolic Writings and its Critique)  
 E 323-40

Fifth Work Period: End of 1942-5 April 1943

["Nach zehn Jahren"]  
(After Ten Years)  
WEN 9-31

"Das 'Ethische' und das 'Christliche' als Thema" 1942-43  
(The "Ethical" and the "Christian" as a Theme)  
E 279-302

"Das konkrete gebot und die göttlichen Mandate"  
(The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates)  
E 303-19



### APPENDIX III

#### Prison Letter of 23 January 1944<sup>1</sup>

I very much agree with what you say in this connection about friendship which, in contrast to marriage and kinship, has no generally recognized rights, and therefore depends entirely on its own inherent quality. It is by no means easy to classify friendship sociologically. Perhaps it is to be regarded as a sub-heading of culture and education, brotherhood being a sub-heading of church, and comradeship a sub-heading of work and politics. Marriage, work, state, and church all have their definite, divine mandate; but what about culture and education? I don't think they can just be classified under work, however tempting that might be in many ways.

They belong, not to the spheres of obedience, but to the broad area of freedom, which surrounds all three spheres of the divine mandates. The man who is ignorant of this area of freedom may be a good father, citizen, and worker, indeed even a Christian; but I doubt whether he is a complete man and therefore a Christian in the widest sense of the term. Our 'Protestant' (not Lutheran) Prussian world has been so dominated by the four mandates that the sphere of freedom has receded into the background. I wonder whether it is possible (it almost seems so today) to regain the idea of the church as providing an understanding of the area of freedom (art, education, friendship,

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 192-93.

play), so that Kierkegaard's 'aesthetic existence' would not be banished from the church's sphere, but would be re-established within it? I really think that is so, and it would mean that we should recover a link with the Middle Ages. Who is there, for instance, in our times, who can devote himself with an easy mind to music, friendship, games, or happiness? Surely not the 'ethical' man, but only the Christian. Just because friendship belongs to this sphere of freedom ('of the Christian man'?!), it must be confidently defended against all the disapproving frowns of 'ethical' existences, though without claiming for it the necessitas of a divine decree, but only the necessitas of freedom. I believe that within the sphere of this freedom friendship is by far the rarest and most priceless treasure, for where else does it survive in this world of ours, dominated as it is by the three other mandates? It cannot be compared with the treasures of the mandates, for in relation to them it is sui generis; it belongs to them as the cornflower belongs to the cornfield.

The Friend<sup>2</sup>

Not from the heavy soil,  
where blood and sex and oath  
rule in their hallowed might,  
where earth itself,  
guarding the primal consecrated order,  
avenges wantonness and madness --  
not from the heavy soil of earth,  
but from the spirit's choice and free desire,  
needing no oath or legal bond,  
is friend bestowed on friend.

Beside the cornfield that sustains us,  
tilled and cared for reverently by men  
sweating as they labour at their task,  
and, if need be, giving their life's blood --  
beside the field that gives their daily bread  
men also let the lovely cornflower thrive.

No one has planted, no one watered it;  
it grows, defenceless and in freedom,  
and in glad confidence of life untroubled  
under the open sky.

Beside the staff of life,  
taken and fashioned from the heavy earth,  
beside our marriage, work, and war,  
the free man, too, will live and grow towards the sun.

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<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, pp. 388-91.

Not the ripe fruit alone --

blossom is lovely, too.

Does blossom only serve the fruit,

or does fruit only serve the blossom --

who knows?

For both are given to us.

Finest and rarest blossom,

at a happy moment springing

from the freedom of a lightsome, daring, trusting spirit,

is a friend to a friend.

Playmates at first

on the spirit's long journeys

to distant and wonderful realms

that, veiled by the morning sunlight,

glitter like gold;

when, in the midday heat

the gossamer clouds in the deep blue sky

drift slowly towards them --

realms that, when night stirs the senses,

lit by the lamps in the darkness,

like treasures prudently hidden

beckon the seeker.

When the spirit touches

man's heart and brow

with thoughts that are lofty, bold, serene,

so that with clear eyes he will face the world

as a free man may;

when then the spirit gives birth to action

by which alone we stand or fall;  
when from the sane and resolute action  
rises the work that gives a man's life  
content and meaning --  
then would that man,  
lonely and actively working,  
know of the spirit that grasps and befriends him,  
like waters clear and refreshing  
where the spirit is cleansed from the dust  
and cooled from the heat that oppressed him,  
steeling himself in the hour of fatigue --  
like a fortress to which, from confusion and danger,  
the spirit returns,  
wherein he finds refuge and comfort and strengthening,  
is a friend to a friend.

And the spirit will trust,  
trust without limit.  
Sickened by vermin  
that feed, in the shade of the good,  
on envy, greed, and suspicion,  
by the snake-like hissing  
of venomous tongues  
that fear and hate and revile  
the mystery of free thought  
and upright heart,  
the spirit would cast aside all deceit,  
open his heart to the spirit he trusts,  
and united with him freely as one.  
Ungrudging, he will support,

will thank and acknowledge him,  
and from him draw happiness and strength.

But always to rigorous  
judgment and censure  
freely assenting,  
man seeks, in his manhood,  
not orders, not laws and peremptory dogmas,  
but counsel from one who is earnest in goodness  
and faithful in friendship,  
making man free.

Distant or near,  
in joy or in sorrow,  
each in the other  
sees his true helper  
to brotherly freedom.

At midnight came the air-raid siren's song;  
I thought of you in silence and for long --  
how you are faring, how our lives once were,  
and how I wish you home this coming year.

We wait till half past one, and hear at last  
the signal that the danger now is past;  
so danger -- if the omen does not lie --  
of every kind shall gently pass you by.



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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

Pursuant to Regulation 3.4.7:

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by me  
and that the work is my own.